

# The Right, With Lincoln

Conservative Intellectuals Interpret Abraham Lincoln,  
*c.* 1945-89

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in History

at the

University of Canterbury

2013

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## Introduction

*But you say you are conservative - eminently conservative - while we are revolutionary, destructive, or something of the sort. What is conservatism? Is it not adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried? We stick to, contend for, the identical old policy on the point in controversy which was adopted by "our fathers who framed the Government under which we live;" while you with one accord reject, and scout, and spit upon that old policy, and insist upon substituting something new... Not one of all your various plans can show a precedent or an advocate in the century within which our Government originated. Consider, then, whether your claim of conservatism for yourselves, and your charge or destructiveness against us, are based on the most clear and stable foundations.*

- Abraham Lincoln, *The Cooper Union Address*  
February 27, 1860

For a century and a half, Abraham Lincoln has been symbolic of the greatest and best of American ideals. He is the leader whose generosity, solemn wisdom, and courage of spirit continue to capture the imaginations of those who read his writings or study his acts. Although not a member of the sublime Founding generation, Lincoln's authority and recognition almost supersedes that of the Founders. Just as Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, pronounced when the president succumbed to wounds, Lincoln truly belongs to the ages now. In the world of politics, immortality has meant that Lincoln's name and image became, almost at the moment his shocking death was announced, a tool to add lustre to earthly causes, right and left, progressive and conservative.

In part, the power of the Lincoln image might be attributed to the circumstances of his death. A Good Friday martyr, Lincoln has become the last victim of that bitter, filial war. He is, in ways, an American Christ-figure: dying so that the more perfect Union might tear, but not sever; to repair bonds of friendship; to remind all of the better angels of our nature. But a

public death alone is not sufficient to cement a legacy. Lincoln's leadership in the greatest crisis in American history demonstrated, undoubtedly, that he ranks among the nation's heroes. In the massive upheavals of war, he drafted and signed the Emancipation Proclamation, perhaps his supreme accomplishment. When coupled with the monumental achievements of saving the Union and emancipating the slaves, Lincoln's life-story further broadens his appeal. Is there a better example of the American dream than the rise from log cabin to White House?

His legacy is greater still: Lincoln's bequeathment of words, as much as his deeds, is a mighty one. While the Emancipation Proclamation may be derided for its legalistic tone, the Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural, the Cooper Union, and the House Divided Speech – along with his many collected writings – contain some of the most beautiful and frequently quoted phrases in the national idiom. By the majesty of his decorous and often conciliatory words, Lincoln stands as one of – perhaps *the* – greatest statesman in United States history.

In light of the immense Lincolnian legacy, those that seek to place themselves within the topography of American political life inevitably run across the question of Lincoln. The leaders of newly emergent movements or ideologies in America must, in some way, respond to, interpret, or use the symbol of Lincoln. The impulse to “get right with Lincoln”, as historian David Donald has suggested, is a strong one. “No reputable political organisation could omit a reference to the Great Emancipator, nor could the disreputable ones”.<sup>1</sup> Beyond name recognition and historic achievements, the source of Lincoln's continued popularity, Donald suggested, lay in his “essential ambiguity”. Lincoln can and has been appropriated by all sides in the political realm.<sup>2</sup> We see in President Barack Obama, for instance, the deliberate cultivation of a public connection to his fellow Illinoisan legislator. “Lincoln saw beyond the bloodshed and division”, Obama writes, “[h]e saw us not only as we were, but as we might be. And he calls on us through the ages to commit ourselves to the unfinished work he so nobly advanced—the work of perfecting our Union”.<sup>3</sup> In these phrases, Lincoln becomes the esteemed forerunner of the progressive project of the modern Democratic Party.

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<sup>1</sup> David Donald, “Getting Right with Lincoln,” in *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1972), pp. 3-18. The line originally came from Rep. Everett Dirksen, the Republican congressman from Illinois and later Senator for Wisconsin. He “assured his Republican colleagues that these days the first task of a politician is ‘to get right with... Lincoln’”, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, “Perfecting Our Union,” *The Atlantic* (2011), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/02/perfecting-our-union/308832/>. See also Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (Melbourne, Australia: Text Publishing Company, 2007), pp. 97-8, 122-3.

Traditionally, however, the Lincoln image was the domain of the Republican Party, although William Taft and Theodore Roosevelt sparred over Lincoln during the Progressive split from the GOP in 1912.<sup>4</sup> It was Franklin Roosevelt that drew on Lincoln as a Father of the New Deal and, from the 1948 election onward, Lincoln was “everybody’s grandfather”, to be interpreted and appropriated as necessary.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of their strong associations with the Republican Party, the new conservatives were at times extremely uncomfortable with their supposed Lincolnian patrimony. How Lincoln – and the Lincoln image – was interpreted and reinterpreted, used, abused, debated, and deployed by conservative intellectuals is the focus of this thesis.

The term “conservative” is by definition anchored to historical location. A thinker considered conservative in 1960 would, no doubt, have held views deemed entirely progressive in 1860. Conversely, a progressive in 1860, by virtue of historical location, might arrive in the twentieth century a stark conservative. The immediate issue, then, is establishing who or what is meant by “conservative” in a discussion of American conservatives after the Second World War. Conservative might imply the maintenance or preservation of a status quo but, as Kevin Mattson argues, the conservatives of the post-war period were in many cases rebelling *against* the establishment.<sup>6</sup> If not a defence of prevailing society, was the conservatism of the twentieth century then a straightforward right-wing political doctrine or ideology? It is true that most of the conservative intellectuals shared political outlooks and voting patterns in practical terms. Beyond electoral politics, however, the thought of the conservative coalition’s intellectual leadership was far from homogenous. The movement encompassed, among others, the borderline authoritarianism of Richard Weaver, the traditionalism of Russell Kirk, the libertarianism of Frank Meyer, and the majoritarianism of Willmoore Kendall. United as they were by both anti-liberalism and anti-communism, the so-called conservative movement was thoroughly divided on a philosophical level.

One could craft a definition of “conservative” and parse out historic thinkers as authentic or inauthentic examples, but that is not the intention here. Instead the varied approaches taken in assessing Abraham Lincoln give a useful insight into the fissures within the conservative movement at a tectonic level. To that end, a practical definition has been adopted. Those that

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<sup>4</sup> Donald, “Getting Right with Lincoln,” pp. 12-3. It was in Lincoln’s name that Roosevelt urged Progressives to re-join the Republican Party.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Mattson, *Rebels All! A Short History of the Conservative Mind in Post-War America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), pp. 21-61.

were considered as conservative by their allies and opponents, those whose thought was published in conservative journals and magazines, are taken at face value and assessed as conservative. In the early post-war period through until the mid-1960s this was a relatively small circle whose quirks, doctrinal and personal, were known to one another and some doctrinal disciplining did occur historically. Those addressed here all remained within the broad confines of post-war conservatism.

As self-conscious conservatives – the first movement in American history to adopt the term – the conservative intellectuals were fundamentally interested in America’s history – their history. By selecting and judging the American past, they were making an act of self-definition. Their interpretations of Lincoln entailed serious claims about themselves and the nation. By including Lincoln as a part of the conservative tradition and congruent –even definitive – of American conservatism, or by rejecting him, they made unequivocal statements about America and equality, freedom, virtue, and order. The clash over Lincoln and the Lincoln legacy was often a proxy, but one with larger cultural-historical implications. The various responses indicate deep divisions within the right over political doctrine. In the struggle between the right’s rejection or adoption of the state, the status of universal rights against a majority opinion, and the relationship between freedom and equality, the Lincoln image was drawn into the debate.

There was a second element of self-definition in the debates over Lincoln as the conservative movement sought to establish its authenticity as an American political and cultural persuasion. The conservative intellectuals struggled to establish the meaning of conservatism in a nation founded in revolution. In interpreting their history, the conservatives attempted to answer whether conservatism meant embodying the principles of Lincoln, or rejecting them as counterfeit. Should authentic conservatives look to the Founders, or to Lincoln, or, indeed, to both, as their antecedents? Implicit is the question of the conservative movement’s relationship with the cultural and political mainstream. In a political framework in which Lincoln is “everybody’s grandfather”, the rejection of Lincoln is a blunt rejection of the political mainstream. Those seeking to accommodate or convince the mainstream may struggle to win converts if they straight-facedly denigrate the immensely popular Lincoln. In settling, or at least putting forth, their arguments over Lincoln, the post-war conservatives were gesturing toward the larger problems of their existence. Political doctrine, authenticity, history, and status: each notion is bound up in the right’s argument over Honest Abe.

Finally, as suggested, the conservatives, and especially the American conservatives, have a close, often reverential, connection with their history. History becomes a source of identity, guidance, and pride. The following analysis might serve as an interesting case study into an instance of the conservative movement's engagement with a contested part of the past in search of a history usable in their own present.

This thesis is intended as a work of intellectual history. In it the thinkers, their ideas in the written form, and the use of those ideas is the subject.<sup>7</sup> As such, this is not a political or social history, but ideas do not form in a vacuum. The social and political contexts within which these intellectuals wrote are essential for understanding their biases, motives, and intentions. In interpreting the emergence of the conservative movement and, by extension, the place of Lincoln within it, George H. Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* remains the benchmark text of the post-war right.<sup>8</sup> Patrick Allitt's *The Conservatives* is a valuable and brisk overview.<sup>9</sup> Kevin Mattson's *Rebels All!* is another useful intellectual history, framing conservatism as a radical reaction against a staid establishment.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Jeffrey Hart's insider history of the movement and, especially, *National Review* is an excellent and fascinating survey of the movement's primary thinkers and popularisers from a close proximity.<sup>11</sup> Because the conservative intellectuals' thought on the first Republican president is so historically located, they are addressed in an essentially chronological order with some thematic unity to each section. Some figures recur, as they themselves recurred in the on-going debate.

It is worth noting that the subject under discussion inhabits the intellectual realm. How Lincoln was interpreted by conservatives is addressed as the debate occurred among the progenitors of the ideas rather than the acceptance these ideas by a wider population. Instead of the view taken of Lincoln among "average" conservatives, the focus is on those men whose work was in the production and dissemination of knowledge and opinion. Those analysed are largely academics, columnists, and public intellectuals. All were published in

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<sup>7</sup> Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* vol. 8, no. 1 (1969), pp. 3-53.

<sup>8</sup> George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, Thirtieth-Anniversary ed. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), passim.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), passim.

<sup>10</sup> Mattson, *Rebels All!*, passim.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Hart, *The Making of the Conservative Mind: National Review and Its Times* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005), passim.

*National Review*, the primary organ of intellectual conservatism, and many in *Modern Age*, its more literary cousin.

Speaking at Cooper Union, Lincoln made his own claims about the nature of American conservatism. Like many of the post-war conservatives, he too located the foundation of America's conservative tradition in "our fathers who framed the Government under which we live". As Lincoln understood it, authentic American conservatism must emerge from the Founders' legacy and be in line with the policies and spirit of that first generation. The twentieth-century intellectuals that claimed conservatism for themselves set about judging Lincoln by this very criterion. Their answers, and their broader views of Lincoln, rested on their ultimate conclusions about his claims of fidelity to the Founders as the movement decided whether it needed to get right with Lincoln, or do away with him entirely.



## Gestures Toward a Conservative Lincoln

In the immediate years following the Second World War, the climate for conservatism, the “thankless persuasion”, appeared arid and its political prospects nil. Yet, the post-war era saw the birth of America’s first successful and self-consciously *conservative* movement.<sup>12</sup> As the United States emerged from the war as the preeminent Western power and into a booming economy, the moral horror of the war had not left the American psyche unscathed. Many questioned how supposedly civilised, modern nations could degenerate into industrial-scale barbarism.<sup>13</sup> Stalin’s Russia prevailed and Europe was brought under the long shadow of its nuclear arsenal, meanwhile the Chinese Revolution and Korean War struck home the prospect of international communism.<sup>14</sup> Domestically, the expansion of the federal government in the New Deal had been compounded by war measures and its opponents were dismayed that Eisenhower and the brief Republican majority had tacitly endorsed rather than repealed the New Deal’s core programmes.<sup>15</sup>

The new conservatism emerged from three distinct but overlapping schools of post-war critics. A libertarian sentiment of strictly limited government and individual liberty swelled in defence of free-market capitalism. Traditionalists decried the loss or neglect of traditional social structures and principles with a belief that liberal society had failed to prevent the evils and tyrannies of the war years. The libertarian and traditionalist impulses were bound together by muscular anti-communism. A departure from the isolationism of the “Old Right”, the new conservatives rejected containment for an unflinching policy of liberation. The three branches of conservatism came together in the person of William F. Buckley, a young Catholic with libertarian leanings. “I believe”, Buckley wrote in the preface of his breakthrough book, “that the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the

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<sup>12</sup> Clinton Lawrence Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Knopf, 1962), see subtitle.

<sup>13</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, pp. 2, 52.

<sup>14</sup> Allitt, *The Conservatives*, p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

world. I further believe that the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle produced on another level".<sup>16</sup>

Critics of the new conservatism espoused by Buckley argued that it had no place in America. The liberal historian and commentator Arthur Schlesinger dismissed the validity of the movement. Conservatives, he argued, attempt to "unite the feudal traditions of British conservatism with the laissez-faire policies of American business. The offspring is a hybrid that retains little contact with the realities of either nation... the New Conservatism is thus severed from the American reality... it is essentially the politics of nostalgia. Its emotions are honourable, generous – and irrelevant".<sup>17</sup> Less than a decade after Schlesinger published his remarks, however, the Republican Party nominated a strict conservative as its candidate in the presidential election.

### *Richard M. Weaver: The Idealist Lincoln*

As isolating as the early post-war years were for conservatives, they were pierced by rays of intellectual light. The first such flare was the jeremiad of an obscure academic. Richard M. Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948) diagnosed a cultural malaise and proposed the beginnings of a plan for reformation. The book generated considerable controversy and has since been recognised as arguably the first word of the nascent post-war conservatism.<sup>18</sup>

As an intellectual, Weaver (b. 1910) was rigorous and idiosyncratic. Conservatives cite Weaver as one of the earliest voices of traditionalist conservatism, but this is an oversimplification. Likewise, although Southern by birth and associated with members of the Fugitive Agrarian group, it is overenthusiastic to identify him too closely with that circle either. Weaver was a writer on Southern Agrarianism rather than a Southern Agrarian writer. His thought on Abraham Lincoln is an example of his independence of thought; it bears out the peculiarities of his philosophy in ways that have been both accepted and ignored by those that followed Weaver's first critical report.

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<sup>16</sup>William F. Buckley, Jr, *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of "Academic Freedom"* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), pp. xii-iii.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, "The New Conservatism: Politics of Nostalgia," *The Reporter*, 6 June 1955, pp. 11-2.

<sup>18</sup>John M. Pafford, *Russell Kirk*, ed. John Meadowcroft, *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), p. 101.

Weaver's principal contributions to conservatism were produced between 1944 and his death in 1963, during his tenure at the University of Chicago. Earning his doctorate at Louisiana State University, Weaver joined the English department at Chicago on the strength of his unpublished dissertation and a recommendation from literary critic Cleanth Brooks.<sup>19</sup> Primarily a rhetorician, Weaver suggested that the revival of "noble rhetoric" was essential to reverse the decline of the West.<sup>20</sup> Rhetoric, correctly understood, is the marriage of right with persuasion, he argued; "truth plus its artful presentation".<sup>21</sup> Its subject was the whole of man. Following Plato, Weaver claimed that noble rhetoric's purpose was the "perfect[ing of] men by showing them better versions of themselves, links in that chain extending up to the ideal".<sup>22</sup> Dialecticians alone were dangerously revolutionary, since they represented truth without considering society. A noble, that is, honest, rhetorician, however, bridges the divide between the society and the ideal by understanding the world and using their knowledge to persuade listeners to accept the truth. In short, noble rhetoric was the uniting of truth with prudence.

Lincoln, Weaver claimed, was the consummate noble rhetorician of the American experience.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Lincoln was a conservative. The interpretation of Lincoln as principled conservative was put in service of his regenerative mission. Because Lincoln was more than simply a pragmatist he represented a sure light for guidance: the model that conservative leaders and the wider Republican Party ought to follow.<sup>24</sup>

Weaver's conclusion rests on his insight that a speaker's favoured form of argument revealed an underlying pattern of thought. "A much surer index to a man's political philosophy is his characteristic way of thinking, inevitably expressed in the type of argument he chooses".<sup>25</sup> The four primary methods of argumentation each implied radically different perspectives of the world and Lincoln was paradigmatic of the argument from definition – the conservative argument. The argument from definition encompassed "all arguments from the nature of the thing... the postulate that there exists classes which are determinate and therefore

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Scotchie, *Barbarians in the Saddle: An Intellectual Biography of Richard M. Weaver* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), pp. 12-14.

<sup>20</sup> Fred Douglas Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995), p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Richard M. Weaver, "The Cultural Role of Rhetoric," in *Language Is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric*, ed. Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), p. 182.

<sup>24</sup> Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, p. 86.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 112.

predictable”.<sup>26</sup> Definitional arguments show that the speaker’s ontological outlook was founded on a belief in timeless essences. “[T]hose who believe in the validity of the argument from [definition] are idealists, roughly, if not very philosophically, defined”.<sup>27</sup> Lincoln was such a thinker.

In the *Ethics of Rhetoric*, Weaver outlined the argument from definition and demonstrated, with Lincoln as his archetype, its centrality to conservatism.<sup>28</sup> In Lincoln’s speeches he found a marked preference for the argument from definition as Lincoln derived propositions from the existence and predictable behaviour of categories. Not just influenced by ideals, Lincoln was idealistic in his very nature: “it characterises his thinking from an early age”.<sup>29</sup> “The true conservative”, Weaver suggested, “is one who sees the universe as a paradigm of essences, of which the phenomenology of the world is a sort of continuing approximation”.<sup>30</sup> Since a metaphysics of ideals is *the* necessary component of conservatism, Lincoln’s clear belief in ideal categories made him, in Weaver’s eyes, a model of conservatism.

The ideal category central to Lincoln’s thought was “man” and the unchanging nature of humanity. Lincoln’s anthropology was unsentimental: fixed, knowable, and, predictable. In debating the national bank Lincoln argued from human nature that duty and self-interest must necessarily coincide.<sup>31</sup> By this framework and anthropology, Lincoln’s arguments were the most “fundamental” since the realist framers of the Constitution. “[N]ot since the Federalist Papers of James Madison had there been in American political life such candid recourse to this term”.<sup>32</sup> His moral clarity let him see more clearly than the “intellectual Jefferson” and the “academic Wilson”.<sup>33</sup> Lincoln was a true intellectual and historical giant to be revered and emulated above the Founders. “He is the father of the nation even more convincingly than Washington”.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the 1850s, Lincoln’s habit of reasoning from the nature of man meant he was “ideally equipped” to argue the issue of slavery.<sup>35</sup> It was his nature to reduce the subject to the only relevant question: the humanity of the slaves. By holding that slaves were indeed

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-110.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 88-9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

men, Weaver argued, Lincoln held the intellectual high-ground from which he skewered his opponents. Southern defenders of slavery, forced to argue from circumstance, were particularly vulnerable. Where *Dred Scott* reduced slaves to chattel property, Southern laws, slaves' capacity for human understanding, and simple procreation showed clearly contradicted this contention. Slaves were people.<sup>36</sup>

Lincoln's mastery of this fact is on display at Peoria. To the argument that justice requires that, as Northerners may bring their property in the form of hogs into the territories, so Southerners must be allowed to bring their property in the form of slaves into the same territories, Lincoln responded "I admit that this is perfectly logical, if there is no difference between hogs and Negroes. But while you thus require me to deny the humanity of the Negro, I wish to ask whether you of the South, yourselves, have ever been willing to do as much".<sup>37</sup> The humanity of slaves had never been systematically denied and Lincoln took advantage of Southern cognitive dissonance. The debate, he said, turned on man and self-government. "When the white man governs himself, that is self-government; but when he governs himself and also governs another man, that is more than self-government – that is despotism".<sup>38</sup> As early as 1854, Weaver noted, Lincoln was explicitly using the timeless ideals of the Declaration of Independence to expose the injustice of slavery. Weaver found this moral clarity and logical rigour immensely admirable and humane.<sup>39</sup> By working prudentially to bring the Union toward a closer approximation of the essence of man, Lincoln had revealed himself as a great and conservative statesman.

Lacking the authority of ideal categories, the defenders of slavery and slavery agnostics resorted to the weak argument from circumstance. Men like Douglas and Calhoun shifted the issue from a matter of "moral right" into one of "existing legal rights" and "necessity".<sup>40</sup> In Weaver's taxonomy the argument from circumstance is both myopic and circular. Its persuasive power is deceptive. Lincoln did not deny the necessity of deference to circumstance. Instead, he viewed it as an obstacle to the ideal: a "retarding" rather than deciding factor.<sup>41</sup> The danger of the argument from circumstance, especially when it prevails, is the debasement of public opinion that leads to societal blindness toward the ideal. Lincoln spoke repeatedly about the "gradual and steady debauching of public opinion", evidence that

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

his intellectual and moral integrity led him to stand for ideals.<sup>42</sup> Weaver saw in Lincoln a reflection of his own view that the ills of society are due to a public that has, through the prevalence of the argument from circumstance among other reasons, become blind to the world of ideals.

There is much unusual about Weaver's thought compared with that of his contemporaries. The most immediate example is his disappointment with Edmund Burke. Weaver was frequently critical of "know-nothing" conservatism and in *The Ethics of Rhetoric* Burke, symbolic of the conservative preservation of the status quo, is juxtaposed with Lincoln.<sup>43</sup> During the writing of *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, Weaver was possibly aware that Russell Kirk's soon to be published *The Conservative Mind* built an entire conservative tradition on Burkean principles, but even so, he was genuinely surprised by the esteem conservatives afforded Burke. Burke, he suggested, was reliant on the argument from circumstance, the argument inherent to liberalism.<sup>44</sup>

By contrast, Weaver was candid about his own conservatism's basis in abstract ideals. "[T]his type of conservative is sometimes found fighting briskly for change; but if there is one thing by which he is distinguished, it is trust in the methods of the law".<sup>45</sup> Abstract truth is identifiable; once identified it must be fought for. Lincoln understood the timelessness of the nature of man and this made him conservative. His belief in essences made him a self-disciplined and objective war leader, something readily apparent in his powerful Second Inaugural address.<sup>46</sup> Yet, Lincoln did not ignore temporal realities either. It was his prudential manoeuvring toward the ideal on the question of slavery, "the necessity of walking a line between the moral imperative and the law", which explains his steps that appear compromising or racist to modern sensibilities.

True conservatism and, by extension, the Republican Party, Weaver concluded, must return to ideals. It was fitting that Lincoln founded the "greatest American conservative party" but tragic that its foundation was so quickly debauched.<sup>47</sup> In 1858 Lincoln told Republicans that

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>43</sup> Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind*, pp. 139-44.

<sup>44</sup> Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, p. 112.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 110-1.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 112-3.

they must “fight this battle upon principle and upon principle alone”.<sup>48</sup> In 1953 Weaver, using Lincoln as a model, was repeating the message.

Southerners, traditionalists, and paleoconservatives view Weaver as one of their own, but, as Willmoore Kendall sagely warned: “every body [sic] appears to be hard put to ‘classify’ Richard Weaver, or to say what he was up to without, pretty soon, sticking his foot in his mouth”.<sup>49</sup> As conservative statements many aspects of Weaver’s thought on Lincoln appear odd. His admiration for Lincoln’s abstract thought and willingness to upset the status quo, his denouncement of Burke, and his defence of ideals over tradition run counter to the views of some of his fellow conservatives. Even his simple respect for Lincoln is notable for a Southern traditionalist, but these arguments were consistent with Weaver’s wider thought.

Although he demurred from calling his work philosophy, the philosophical underpinnings of Weaver’s “intuition of a situation” are clear.<sup>50</sup> He identified with “those thinkers in the Platonic-Christian tradition” who affirm “that form is prior to substance, and that ideas are determinants”.<sup>51</sup> Several of Weaver’s basic assumptions echo Platonic idealism but he was not in all things a Platonist. While not an obviously orthodox Christian, his work suggests a deep reservoir of Christian thought. His conception of human nature was predicated on Original Sin, a notion he believed to be a profound insight into humanity; an “allegoric” expression of man’s “tendency to do the wrong thing when he knows the right”.<sup>52</sup> The main subject of his work was the conservation of Western civilisation, the inheritance of which includes both Platonic and Christian thought – often in tandem. As such, Weaver incorporated both strands of the Western tradition, sitting somewhere between Plato and St. Paul.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>49</sup> Willmoore Kendall, “How to Read Richard Weaver: Philosopher of ‘We the (Virtuous) People’,” *Intercollegiate Review* vol. 2, no. 1 (1965), p. 81.

<sup>50</sup> Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind*, p. 107.

<sup>51</sup> Richard M. Weaver, “Letter,” *New York Times Book Review*, March 21 1948., p. 29., cited in Richard L. Johannesen, “A Reconsideration of Richard M. Weaver’s Platonic Idealism,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* vol. 21, no. 2 (1991), p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> There is a worthwhile debate regarding the relative Platonic and Christian elements in Weaver’s work. Richard L. Johannesen has argued that Weaver was, in many ways, although not completely, a Platonist. Charles Kellogg Follette has argued that Weaver’s moral casuistry is in essence the Christian theological concept of grace in Charles Kellogg Follette, “A Weaverian Interpretation of Richard Weaver” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1981). Johannesen has reconsidered view in Johannesen, “A Reconsideration of Richard M. Weaver’s Platonic Idealism,” includes greater reference to Weaver’s Christian influence, without accepting Follette’s thesis *in toto*. Conservative North Carolina Senator John East argues for Weaver’s dual heritage in John P. East, “Richard M. Weaver: The Conservatism of Affirmation,” *Modern Age* vol. 19, no. 4 (1975), *passim*.

Weaver's conservatism stemmed from a deep disenchantment with modernity and its attendant liberalism. An intellectual biographer has suggested that he modelled himself on John Crowe Ransom, a founding member of the Fugitive group and contributor to the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*. Ransom supervised Weaver's Master's work at Vanderbilt, the centre of the Agrarian movement, and his last completed book, *Visions of Order*, was dedicated to his old supervisor.<sup>54</sup> In it he articulated the concept of the "doctor of culture", a role he envisioned for himself and his teacher.<sup>55</sup> As part of a society, the doctor of culture had the detachment to observe society's ills and resilience to suggest painful but necessary remedies. Weaver believed he had uncovered the root of Western civilisation's ailment and was steadily producing a programme of remedies. In this programme, Lincoln was a tonic; a pure and prominent model to be emulated.

The problems of modernity were traceable to the triumph of philosophical nominalism. Dating back to the fourteenth century Scholastic William of Occam, nominalism has had a deleterious effect on not only Western civilisation but the human psyche itself. Until the twentieth century, the West had lived on the intellectual and moral capital of the pre-nominalist tradition. Now society was suffering the inevitable effects of the long supremacy of nominalism. The consequences were varied and disastrous. Objective truth was rejected as man became the measure of all things. Original Sin was abandoned for a conception of humanity as un-fallen and therefore good. "Why" was rejected in favour of "how" and the worship of science and its compulsion to control nature. Nominalism, Weaver claimed, led to a solipsism where the mind is the arbiter of right and wrong and the relations between God and Man and Man and Man are atomised.<sup>56</sup>

The civilizational sickness of the West demanded urgent attention. The remedy must be the wholesale rejection of nominalism and the re-acquaintance with philosophical and linguistic absolutes. A clear distinction between right and wrong must be made so that "eyes bleary from looking at particulars could be refocused on universals".<sup>57</sup> Weaver believed the rhetorician could encourage these fundamental changes, but the discipline of rhetoric had itself suffered the ravages of nominalism. The fourteenth century debate between the aim of rhetoric was truthful speaking or eloquent speaking had been decided in favour of eloquence

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<sup>54</sup> Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind*, pp. 5, 56-7. Ransom's *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy* was singularly influential on Weaver's views on religion

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 3-8.

<sup>57</sup> Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind*, p. 110.



as philosophers became doubtful of “Essential forms”. In turn, the standard purpose of rhetoric deteriorated from eloquence to mere utility and function as rhetoric became simply modern sophistry.<sup>58</sup>

The first order for Weaver, then, was the return of rhetoric to its true calling: teaching the speaking of truth and the clear definition of words. “It is often thoughtlessly said that the restoration of our broken world lies largely in the hands of the teachers”.<sup>59</sup> This is true, but not understood. Disorder cannot be overcome through the teaching of more disorder. In this instance where disorder has been wrought by relativism, the teacher’s responsibility is to “stand guard against relativism” and apply the standard of truth.<sup>60</sup> Rhetoricians must be restored to their classical role and rhetoric must be not mere persuasion, but persuasion of truth.

Weaver occupied himself with imbuing his students, conservatives, and the public with a sense of moral truth and the compositional eloquence to foster a return to the “paradigm of essences”. With their understanding of the human condition, noble rhetoricians, like Lincoln in the nineteenth century, would gently but powerfully convince society of the truth of ideals. Despite the grimness of his worldview, Weaver was ultimately optimistic about the success of this task.

Lincoln was Weaver’s model of a noble rhetorician. Here was a great American statesman who stood for each of the elements necessary for Western civilisation’s renewal. Lincoln had a belief in ideals, an understanding of human nature, a rhetorical eloquence built on truth, moral clarity, and a prudential but not deferential approach to circumstance. He was unafraid to define. By expounding on Lincoln, Weaver hoped for a new birth of Lincolnian thought.

It does not stretch the historical record to attribute these characteristics to Lincoln but additional factors made the president a compelling model for Weaver’s project. Where the classical figures of rhetoric like Plato and Cicero were distant and staid, Lincoln was relevant and accessible to the twentieth century American mind. The Lincoln image is powerful because he is an authentic and profoundly American symbol: iconic *and* admired. Gallup found in 1951 that 45 % of respondents named Lincoln as the greatest president, more than twice as many as the second-ranked Washington. A second survey in 1956, found that 62 %

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<sup>58</sup> Richard M. Weaver, “To Write the Truth,” *College English* vol. 10, no. 1 (1948), pp. 25-6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

of respondents ranked Lincoln among the three greatest presidents.<sup>61</sup> His reputation as “Honest Abe” further leant itself to Weaver’s mission of establishing truth as the primary concern of rhetoric. Indeed, Weaver argued that Lincoln was almost unique in his nation’s past for his adherence to the argument from definition. He was the obvious choice as an American model of noble rhetoric.

As a political exercise, Weaver was using Lincoln as a goad for the Republican Party. A “hill country Republican” and supporter of the conservative senator Robert Taft, Weaver’s primary audience was conservatives and Republicans.<sup>62</sup> The Grand Old Party did have a conservative and free-market component, but its leadership was dominated by the moderate to liberal “Eastern Establishment” and its presidential candidates tended toward a style of managerial pragmatism. The emerging conservatives were a minority within the party and to conservatives the Eisenhower administration epitomised the laxity of the party. Eisenhower had made no serious attempt to roll back the New Deal and appeared to accept a policy of containment toward communism. The administration’s failure to intervene in Hungary was a blow for conservatives. The moderate “Eisenhower Republicans”, lacking political principle, failed to offer an alternative to liberalism. As William Buckley editorialised: “I prefer Ike”.<sup>63</sup>

In his Lincoln essay, Weaver called explicitly for the Republican Party and conservatives generally to adopt Lincoln’s model. He urged Republicans to base their arguments and positions on principle, eschewing the pragmatism of “Me-Too” Republicanism. A return to principle, he thought, would be both persuasive rhetorically and electorally. Moreover, it was a moral imperative. So returned to the world of ideals, conservatives could rehabilitate society at large. Again the Lincoln image was well suited for this use. As the first Republican president he was iconic for the Party – Surveys in 1945 and 1956 asking Americans to list the nation’s three greatest presidents found that 70% of Republicans named Lincoln, compared with only 54 % of Democrats – a difference not solely attributable to Southern Democrats.<sup>64</sup> By promoting Lincoln, Weaver was appealing to Northern and Western Republicans who

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<sup>61</sup> Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 93. Franklin Roosevelt was also chosen by a similar proportion and just under half of those surveyed placed Washington among the greatest.

<sup>62</sup> Johannesen, "A Reconsideration of Richard M. Weaver's Platonic Idealism," pp. 3-6., Scotchie, *Barbarians in the Saddle*, p. 71.

<sup>63</sup> Allitt, *The Conservatives*, pp. 176-7. Gillian Peele, "American Conservatism in Historical Perspective," in *Crisis of Conservatism: The Republican Party, the Conservative Movement, & American Politics after Bush*, ed. Joel D. Aberbach and Gillian Peele (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 21.

<sup>64</sup> Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*, p. 101. There was remarkable consistency over the ten year period. In 1945 the partisan breakdown was Republicans: 70%, Democrats: 53%. In 1956 it was Republicans: 71%, Democrats: 55%.

strongly associated with the president.<sup>65</sup> In Lincoln he had a powerful example of noble rhetoric that was both American and widely admired by his prospective conservative and Republican audience.

Weaver's championing of Lincoln was in a way contrary to his otherwise very Southern scholarship. His earliest work had been an apologia for antebellum Southern society yet Weaver wrote that "[Lincoln's] name is now immune against partisan rancour, and he has long ceased to be a mere sectional hero".<sup>66</sup> Weaver thought Lincoln's national legacy was a testament to his greatness, but he overestimated Southern reconciliation with Lincoln. While the Agrarians had been broadly neutral toward Lincoln, later Southern conservatives, M. E. Bradford most notably, excoriated Lincoln for his perceived role in the destruction of the agrarian South.<sup>67</sup>

Southern identity was a part of Weaver's essence, but he lived out of the South for most his working career – returning annually to family land in Weaverville, NC. Like his relationship with the Agrarians, Weaver was of but not in the Southern milieu.<sup>68</sup> The Old South, he claimed, was "the last non-materialist civilisation in the Western World".<sup>69</sup> Obviously Lincoln had been integral to the end of American slavery. The Southern feudal system was undermined entirely when its labour system was shattered. Weaver painted a relatively benign view of the practice of slavery in *The Southern Tradition at Bay* and his writings on the civil rights movement were sceptical of integration, endorsing the segregationist position.<sup>70</sup> Yet, in his affirmation that Lincoln was right in his abhorrence of slavery, Weaver was unequivocal that slavery is immoral and unjustifiable. He did not let the particulars or circumstance of the Old South distort moral vision and this allowed him to see Lincoln as a great man. Elements of the South had a timeless value that had been lost, but the ghost of the South haunted the nation. Weaver yearned for a return to a non-materialistic world, but could not council the resurgence of an idealised antebellum South. The South was not a foundation,

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<sup>65</sup> Scotchie, *Barbarians in the Saddle*, p. 67.

<sup>66</sup> Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, p. 108.

<sup>67</sup> Bradford has a considerable body of work critical of Lincoln, see the final section of this thesis for analysis of his position.

<sup>68</sup> Young, *Richard M. Weaver, 1910-1963: A Life of the Mind*, p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought*, ed. George Core and M. E. Bradford (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington Books, 1968), p. 391.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Weaver's descriptions of race relations in the antebellum South appear mainly on pp. 50-6, 167-76, 260-71. For discussion of his contemporary political writings, see M. E. Bradford, "The Agrarianism of Richard Weaver: Beginnings and Completions," *Modern Age* vol. 14, no. 3-4 (1970), p. 254.

nor, because of slavery, an example. Instead, like the Agrarians, Weaver believed the South was a challenge to the materialist, nominalist world he lived in.<sup>71</sup>

That Richard Weaver was influential in the emergence of the conservative intellectual movement is certain. His political views, however, did not take root in the movement's thought. Weaver was primarily a cultural critic rather than political theorist and though Willmoore Kendall argued that there was an important element of political theory in Weaver's thought, it was his cultural critique that was remembered.<sup>72</sup> There was also an elusiveness in tone and highness of style in Weaver's writing that let others to read their own philosophy into his work. Weaver remarked that "many people have written to me to say that they found their own thoughts expressed in the book".<sup>73</sup> Kendall believed Weaver to be a philosopher of the virtuous people, to Frank Meyer he held a position between tradition and liberty, and to Kirk he valued hierarchy and tradition.<sup>74</sup> William F. Buckley "punished" inquirers that pressed him for a brief definition of conservatism with Weaver's definition of a "paradigm of essences toward which the phenomenology of the world is a continuing approximation".<sup>75</sup> In spite of the regard in which he was held by the intellectuals that followed him, traditionalist thinker M.E. Bradford suggested that Weaver remained "something of a puzzle" to "establishment conservatives", especially in his more authoritarian positions.<sup>76</sup> A similar phenomenon exists among Weaver's Southern successors, several professed a great debt to his life's work while rejecting his thought on Lincoln and allegiance to idealism.

Weaver's Lincoln interpretation was not wholly adopted by those conservatives that immediately followed him. In part the disparate nature of the movement, geographically and intellectually, prevented an early orthodoxy on any subject emerging swiftly, least of all on Lincoln. To argue, though, that Weaver's ideas were ignored because they were not heard above the din of the young movement is insufficient. He was well-regarded by conservatives

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<sup>71</sup> Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay*,

<sup>72</sup> Kendall, "How to Read Richard Weaver: Philosopher of 'We the (Virtuous) People'," pp. 77-86.

<sup>73</sup> Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*

Paperback ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. v.

<sup>74</sup> Kendall, "How to Read Richard Weaver: Philosopher of 'We the (Virtuous) People'," pp. 77-86, Frank S. Meyer, "Richard M. Weaver: An Appreciation," *Modern Age* vol 14, no. 3-4 (1970), pp. 243-8, Russell Kirk, "Foreword" in Richard M. Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Times* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), passim.

<sup>75</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr, "Introduction," in *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking? American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. William F. Buckley, Jr (Indianapolis, IN & New York, NY: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970), pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>76</sup> Bradford, "The Agrarianism of Richard Weaver: Beginnings and Completions," p. 249.

– he contributed regularly to *National Review* and *Modern Age* and was the author of several popular books. He was a noted speaker at several conservative events. Weaver spent time with Russell Kirk at his home in Michigan, and maintained friendships with many others, including Frank Meyer and Mel Bradford, both of whom visited him to challenge his views on Lincoln.<sup>77</sup>

Conservatism's lack of cohesion was an important factor. The movement Weaver helped spark was still in its nascence and lacked a coherent political and cultural philosophy. It was broadly for Western Civilisation and against liberalism, but in the burgeoning movement these tendencies manifested themselves in a variety of ways. When Kendall designated Weaver "captain of the anti-liberal team" he identified the coalition as anti-liberal rather than coherently conservative. Weaver was one voice – a useful and important one – but only one in an increasingly loud opposition movement to the liberal consensus.

Further, despite Buckley's ironical use of Weaver's definition of conservatism, his was a unique interpretation, at odds with other prominent competing conservative philosophies. It is no mistake that Weaver selected Lincoln as his model while a great many other conservatives, notably, but not exclusively, Kirk, chose Edmund Burke. Weaver's insistence on absolutes appeared dangerously close to the abstract ideologies conservatives detested: that Weaver's conservatives could be "found fighting quite briskly for change" is revealing.<sup>78</sup> The modern conservative critics of Lincoln each acknowledged moral absolutes but they were reluctant to allow them into the sphere of political theory, emphasising instead gradualism and circumstance. Because of the tone and targets of Weaver's famous works, his reputation was as a cultural critic not political theorist. Other conservatives may have been willing to acknowledge Lincoln as a symbol of moral certitude, but were anxious about politics that were ostensibly based on abstract ideology. Weaver's concern for ideals is shared by the Straussian school, a force emergent in conservatism from the late 1950s, and his admiration for Lincoln was extended along similar lines by the Straussian political philosopher Harry Jaffa.

The intra-conservative doctrinal debates were cut-and-thrust affairs and the Lincoln question was no exception. The major criticisms of Lincoln from conservative intellectuals appeared after Weaver's death. Had his career not ended so abruptly, perhaps Weaver might have had a

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<sup>77</sup> Scotchie, *Barbarians in the Saddle*, p. 69.

<sup>78</sup> Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, p. 113.

right of reply, a conservative defence of Lincoln. Harry Jaffa fulfilled the role of Lincoln's conservative defender, but it is a loss that Weaver was not able to extend the case himself.

### *Russell Kirk: The Burkean Lincoln*

In the ferment of early conservatism Weaver's friend and contemporary Russell Kirk (b. 1918) was of particular importance. A mid-western academic-cum-reclusive writer and intellectual, Kirk articulated a deeply traditional conservative philosophy that extolled Western cultural achievement and traditional mores against the industrialisation of modern life. His *The Conservative Mind* (1953), the product of his doctoral research at St. Andrew's in Scotland, was an "eloquent, defiant, impassioned *cri de coeur*" that catalysed the new conservatism.<sup>79</sup> Tracing an Anglo-American conservative tradition from Edmund Burke to the twentieth-century United States, Kirk's intention was not historical inquiry alone. Instead he sought build an intellectual foundation and tradition of American conservatism in defiance of the entrenched liberalism.<sup>80</sup> It was his hope that the American element in his genealogy of Anglophone conservatism would serve as a useable, alternate heritage and corrective to society.

As an historian Kirk tended to read conservatism into his subjects. Arthur Schlesinger suggested that he was motivated by a romantic nostalgia for European aristocratic society. His attempt to express a conservative tradition was a scattershot collection of intellectuals with no abiding connection: "an unconvincing and thoroughly artificial genealogy".<sup>81</sup> Those sympathetic to Kirk's aims also questioned the extent to which his narrative was a true reflection of history. William Schlam, while taking a largely positive view of the book, argued that Kirk's attempt to portray America as historically conservative weakened its thesis since "no amount of skilful eloquence can alter... manifest fact".<sup>82</sup> *The Conservative Mind* is

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<sup>79</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, pp. 104, 109.

<sup>80</sup> Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1951), Trilling famously wrote that in "the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition", p. ix. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), pp. 62-428.

<sup>81</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, "The Politics of Nostalgia," in *The Politics of Hope and Bitter Heritage: American Liberalism in the 1960s*, ed. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 97.

<sup>82</sup> William S. Schlam, "Civilized Conversation: Review of a Program for Conservatives," *The Freeman* December(1954), p. 233. David Frum, eulogizing Kirk in the *New Criterion*, remarked that "Kirk always reminded me of those nineteenth century Central European historians who promoted national consciousness by writing passionate histories of "nations" that had not existed until those same historians invented them... Russell Kirk inspired the post-war conservative movement by pulling together a series of only partially related

not a history, wrote a sympathetic obituarist, “it is a work of literature meant to achieve political ends”.<sup>83</sup> Such interpretive foibles notwithstanding, *The Conservative Mind* was well reviewed and exceeded all expectations as a surprise bestseller.<sup>84</sup>

In his search for a coherent conservative history Kirk ignored or downplayed major figures, including Abraham Lincoln. He praised several of the Founders – namely Washington, Hamilton, and Adams – but was notably silent on Jefferson. After John Quincy Adams, none of Kirk’s American subjects were politicians. Disillusioned with America’s later political leadership, Kirk held that the conservative tradition was instead transmitted through intellectuals and cultural critics.

Lincoln appears in *The Conservative Mind* three times: twice for a turn of phrase and once in a discussion of Boston Brahmin James Russell Lowell.<sup>85</sup> Despite his defence of the Union, Kirk found no place for Lincoln in the conservative canon. Instead he heaped praise on John C. Calhoun, as a principled thinker whose intellectual development arrived at a commanding defence of hierarchy and tradition against “optimism, equalitarianism, meliorism, and Jeffersonian democracy”.<sup>86</sup>

Kirk’s project was a delicate one. He needed to fashion a coherent conservatism while maintaining his principled rejection of “ideology”. *The Conservative Mind* established a set of principles that a conservative would assent to. He emphasised order, tradition, and heritage over uniformity, equality, progressivism; belief in property and liberty; a prejudice for reform over revolution; and a fundamental belief in a “divine intent” that governs society and binds humanity.<sup>87</sup> Kirk’s conservative philosophy was bound up with his reading of Edmund Burke. “Burke’s is the true school of conservative principle”. “Every conservative thinker discussed... even the Federalists... felt the influence of the great Whig, although sometimes the ideas of Burke penetrated to them only through a species of intellectual filter”.<sup>88</sup> A conservative, according to Kirk, is someone whose temperament is Burkean and whose thought and action corresponds with the conservative canons.

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ideas and events into a coherent narrative” in David Frum, “The Legacy of Russell Kirk,” *The New Criterion* vol. 13, no. 4 (1994), pp. 10-16

<sup>83</sup> Frum, “The Legacy of Russell Kirk,” pp. 10-16.

<sup>84</sup> Henry Regnery, “Russell Kirk and the Making of the Conservative Mind,” *Modern Age* vol. 21, no. 4 (1977), p. 340.

<sup>85</sup> Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, pp. 7, 293, 299.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150. There was, in Calhoun, “the prescience of a solitary, powerful, melancholy mind which has pierced through the cloud of transitory political haggling to a future of social turbulence and moral desolation”.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Lincoln failed to meet these criteria. Kirk did not hold Lincoln accountable for presiding over the upheavals of the Civil War, but he struggled to see him as anything like a conservative statesman. “Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency of the United States is the great line of demarcation in the history of America”. “American moral and political conservatism has not yet recovered, and perhaps never can”.<sup>89</sup> That Lincoln drafted and signed the Emancipation Proclamation – the antithesis of gradualism – at least partially disqualified him as a conservative. Richard Weaver emphasised timeless ideals and brought Lincoln into the conservative fold as a champion of moral absolutes. Kirk also emphasised ideals, but in conjunction with tests of fidelity to slow and judicious reform. Lincoln’s recourse to the language of equality in his most important speeches skirted too close to Jacobinism for Kirk to endorse. The Gettysburg Address, in particular, may be read as a radical statement in favour of economic and political levelling. If the historical Lincoln was not a radical, there was enough in his language and legacy for Kirk to hesitate in co-opting him for the conservative counter-history.

In the conservative milieu, Kirk knew Richard Weaver well; Weaver wrote the inaugural essay for Kirk’s quarterly *Modern Age* in 1957.<sup>90</sup> He held Weaver in high regard as a thinker and later traced the genesis of the conservative movement back to the North Carolinian. *Ideas Have Consequences* is cited in *The Conservative Mind* but Kirk’s manifesto was printed before Weaver’s essay on Lincoln was published.<sup>91</sup> Driven by Weaver’s promotion of Lincoln, Kirk made a reassessment of the president. He was eager to agree with Weaver, “one of the most courageous men in America”, but struggled with his friend’s attack on Burke.<sup>92</sup>

By contrasting Edmund Burke with Abraham Lincoln, Weaver was attempting to steer the conservative movement toward the politics of principle. Broadly supportive of this aim, Kirk found several missteps in his approach. “Mr. Weaver’s illustrations of his thesis are bold and closely reasoned but some of them are needlessly hazardous to his thesis – especially his comparison of Burke’s rhetoric with Lincoln’s”.<sup>93</sup> Weaver’s familiarity with Burke was

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<sup>89</sup> Russell Kirk, "The Measure of Abraham Lincoln," *The Month* vol. 2, no. 4 (1954), pp. 197-8.

<sup>90</sup> Kirk invited Weaver to lecture at Michigan State upon reading *Ideas Have Consequences*. Although the two had different philosophies and levels of integration with the modern world, they were friendly and in correspondence.

<sup>91</sup> Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, p. 451. Both *Ethics of Rhetoric* and *The Conservative Mind* were published in 1953 by Henry Regnery.

<sup>92</sup> Russell Kirk, "Ethical Labour," in *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, ed. Russell Kirk (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company, 1956), pp. 79-100.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.



admirable but his praise for Lincoln's principles resembled "the demon of the absolute".<sup>94</sup> Even so, in a qualified manner, Kirk agreed with Weaver's point.

"Mr. Weaver's 'true conservative' is really what Mr. Weaver (and this writer, so far as my opinion is of any consequence) would *like* conservatives to be".<sup>95</sup> With some abstraction Lincoln may be acceptable on conservative terms. Kirk's first principle of conservatism was the belief in a divine order and if Lincoln championed the timeless then he may have been conservative. Even so, Kirk remained uncomfortable with Weaver's definition since it precluded Burke. Instead, Kirk argued that there was an historical definition of conservative – from *conservatif*, a term first used in Restoration France that meant adherence to Burke's thought articulated in *Reflections*.<sup>96</sup> If this is the *a priori* definition of conservative it is absurd to reject Burke. Believing that definitions emerging organically out of history were surer guides than abstract theorising, Kirk was extremely wary of ideal thought detached from history. However, Kirk held that Weaver need not jettison Burke under his own terms. Although contemptuous of "abstraction", Burke had an abiding love of "principle". "[W]ithout principles, all reasonings in politics, as in everything else, would only be a confused jumble of particular facts and details, without the means of drawing out any... conclusion".<sup>97</sup> Burke, like Kirk, forewent abstraction but never abandoned principle.

If Kirk believed that Weaver was unduly critical of Burke, he thought his friend overly complimentary toward Lincoln. He deferred to Weaver in conceding that Lincoln favoured the argument from principle over circumstance, but questioned the extent to which he acted on those principles. Lincoln, Kirk argued, was inconsistent. The Emancipation Proclamation may have been a wise decision but it was a "radical departure from the principles Lincoln had expounded before the war and during". Neither did Kirk accept that a pattern of thought constituted conservatism – the test remained practice. In all things Edmund Burke remained the better example of consistent, principled thought and action.<sup>98</sup>

Indeed, Weaver's argument could be rendered as an absurdity. "An adversary might say, 'very well: a conservative is a man who argues from definition of *a priori* assumptions. Lincoln is a better conservative than Burke, because Lincoln frequently referred to abstract assumptions; and Robespierre is a better conservative than even Lincoln, because

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. The parenthetical remarks are Kirk's.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

Robespierre *always* guided himself by reference to abstract definition, with a fine indifference to particular circumstances”. Kirk recognized that this was an unfair characterization of Weaver’s argument but was unequivocal that Weaver had left himself open to the bizarre conclusion that “Robespierre is a better rhetorician and a sounder ethical thinker than Burke or Lincoln”.<sup>99</sup> A more complete understanding of Weaver’s position recognised that noble rhetoric married timeless truth with an understanding of society and the human condition. The result was prudential governance guided always by the ideal. Kirk had criticised the distorted argument without addressing its deeper meaning.

Despite professing agreement with Weaver, Kirk remained ambivalent on Lincoln. In part he was motivated by Lincoln’s use as a critique of Burke. In defending Burke, Kirk had delegitimised Lincoln and retained his earlier judgement that Lincoln did not meet the conservative criteria. Even so, Weaver stimulated Kirk to make a further investigation of Lincoln.<sup>100</sup>

*The Measure of Abraham Lincoln* (1954) occupies an unusual place in Kirk’s writing. It appeared within a year of both Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* and Weaver’s *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Influenced by Weaver, it also drew liberally from Stanley Pargellis’s examination of Lincoln’s political philosophy and Benjamin Thomas’s biography of Lincoln.<sup>101</sup> The essay itself reads like errata for *The Conservative Mind* informed by Weaver’s arguments but was only published in an English Jesuit magazine and was not collected any later anthologies of Kirk’s essays. It does, however, feature prominently on the website for the Russell Kirk Center and is cited frequently in conservatives’ debates over Lincoln. It represents Kirk’s growing comfort with Lincoln’s role in American history: in *The Measure of Abraham Lincoln* the reappraised Lincoln passes muster in his historical role, his aims, and his nature.<sup>102</sup>

Through Weaver, Thomas, and Pargellis, Kirk discovered a conservative Lincoln, one that showed conservative leadership in the great moment of crisis. While Andrew Johnson lacked the mind and temper to protect the South from the excesses of Reconstruction despite doing “all he could to realise *the wise and moderate policies which Lincoln had outlined*”, his

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>100</sup> Kirk, "The Measure of Abraham Lincoln," pp. 197-206.

<sup>101</sup> Stanley Pargellis, "Lincoln's Political Philosophy," *The Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* vol. 3, no. 6 (1945), pp. 275-90;

<sup>102</sup> Kirk, "The Measure of Abraham Lincoln," pp. 197-206.

implementation of Lincoln's judicious policies saved the South from total debasement.<sup>103</sup> Kirk distinguished Lincoln from the "Radical Republicans" – men like Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens that Kirk viewed as dangerous idealogues. Far from utopian, Lincoln's moderation and caution meant "the Radical Republicans detest[ed] him as much as the Southern zealots did". In his new portrait, Kirk's Lincoln is a man of wisdom and prudence.<sup>104</sup>

While both Weaver and Pargellis concluded that Lincoln was conservative, their reasoning differed greatly. Stanley Pargellis was essential in convincing Kirk of Lincoln's conservatism. He argued that Lincoln's philosophy was founded upon belief in prudence, the organic nation, guiding principles as distinct from abstract theories, and the direction of divine Providence – a set of principles remarkably close to Kirk's later conservative canons. Lincoln shared the philosophical framework of conservative greats Churchill, Coleridge, and Burke.<sup>105</sup> The distinguishing feature of Lincoln's conservatism was that it had equality as its guiding principle; the methods he employed to enact equality, however, illustrated his conservative mind. Pargellis's argument was far closer and more amenable to Kirk's thought, although it prefigured Weaver's emphasis on guidance by principle. Kirk, prompted by Weaver's advocacy of Lincoln, was only truly convinced by Pargellis.

Lincoln became, for Kirk, a statesman in the Burkean mould without having read the Anglo-Irish orator. Not a doctrinaire statesman, Kirk's Lincoln had a clear-eyed vision tempered by a love of prudence. He was not compelled by the "abstractions of modern revolutionaries".<sup>106</sup> Although he hated slavery, Lincoln was no abolitionist: his support of the Emancipation Proclamation hinged on military necessity, rather than "moral judgement". "Lincoln... perceived distinctly the complexity of this problem... while Senator Sumner... eminent among New England illuminate, remained oblivious to all the gargoyle faces that huddled slyly behind fanatic abolition. For a long time, Lincoln resisted the importunities of the Radicals in favour of Negro emancipation; he yielded at length, out of the desperate necessities of the Union cause". Lincoln was a model of temperance and moderation, not as myopic devotion to the middle-path "but because he held by the principle that the unity and security of the United States transcended any fanatic scheme of unity". "In this, for the most

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 197-8. Italics added.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Pargellis, "Lincoln's Political Philosophy," p. 287.

<sup>106</sup> Kirk, "The Measure of Abraham Lincoln," pp. 197-206.

part, as in much else, Abraham Lincoln was a conservative statesman of a high order”.<sup>107</sup> In his admiration for statesmen that united just principles with the wise leadership, Kirk came to see Lincoln as one of these great men, gaining an appreciation for the president where previously there had been little.

Like Weaver, Kirk stressed Lincoln’s moral probity. His “greatness came from his recognition of enduring moral principle”. The Founders had established “a standard maxim for a free society” to be constantly approximated, if not achieved. “To this ideal of liberty under law, Lincoln added his own example, which has worked incalculable good in, the altered America which has followed 1865”.

In his concern for society’s morality Kirk saw a function for social religion and appreciated Lincoln’s example. Although he later affirmed orthodox Catholicism, at the time of writing Kirk endorsed a broadly Judeo-Christian faith that delineated right and wrong. He understood Lincoln as a Christian in only the loosest sense, if at all, but a man shaped by the language and doctrine of Christianity. “Solitary reading of the Bible gave majesty to his mind and his style, but never brought him any faith less cloudy and austere than a solemn theism”. Nevertheless, “there have been few Americans more thoroughly graced with the theological virtues, charity most of all. The New Testament shines out from his acts of mercy, and the Old from his direction of war”. That Lincoln used the language of God and Providence prominently in his public and private writings, particularly later in his presidency, indicated to Kirk Lincoln’s keen awareness of society’s “divine intent”. Lincoln’s religiosity was very like his own. Kirk quoted with favour Lincoln’s judgement that “in the present civil war, it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party... The will of God prevails”. Lincoln “knew what moved him was a power from without himself; and, having served God’s will according to the light that was given him, he received the reward of the last full measure of devotion”.<sup>108</sup>

On a principled, religious, and prudential level, Kirk’s Lincoln was more a part of the conservative tradition than he had initially allowed, but he remained reluctant praise him too forthrightly. Twenty years later Kirk addressed Lincoln again, briefly praising him in his survey of the War for Independence. Lincoln, he wrote, was noteworthy not for his political achievements but his noble character. He became a straightforwardly conservative champion:

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

in Lincoln for “the first time we see a man from the common clay as a defender of order”.<sup>109</sup> He was “misunderstood in life... [and] misinterpreted since his death... The maintaining of order, as expressed in Declaration and Constitution, was his steady aim”.<sup>110</sup> His election was still the demarcation line in American history, but Kirk’s Lincoln, a lover of prescription, now explicitly *prevented* the victory of disorder.

The primary conceit of this portrait, however, was Lincoln as a model of classical virtue. The Founders had, with the Roman Republic in mind, hoped for American statesmen endowed with virtue. Washington embodied this ideal with the “unbought grace of Life” and Lincoln “has come to stand as Washington’s equal in republican virtue”.<sup>111</sup> Though rough-hewn, the war brought forth greatness from Lincoln. He was a leader who combined *gravitas* (“the sense of heavy responsibility”) with *comitas* (the wry humour that tempers *gravitas*). In office, Lincoln acquired *pietas* (submission to the divine and country) and *officium* (duty and service). He:

[w]as struck down at the height of his powers, having confronted the agony of the Civil War with firmness of purpose – which the Romans had called *constantia*. He fulfilled his office with *disciplina*, or steadiness of character; with *industria*, or hard labour; with *clementia*, or forgoing his own rights; with *frugalitas*, or austere abstinence; with *virtus*, or energetic manliness. He died at the moment when his hopes were rewarded and his acts justified... He left to the Republic something better than military or political victory: the example of strong probity.<sup>112</sup>

Most importantly, in his task Lincoln had exhibited the charioteer of the virtues: *prudentia*.

Thus Kirk’s Lincoln was vaulted from a president all but ignored in his history of the conservative mind, to a heroic standard of conservative virtue. He was personally heroic and historically great, but as the preserver of Union and order, not as emancipator of slaves. Kirk downplayed Lincoln’s role in the end of slavery and was silent on his promotion of equality as the “ancient faith” of America. The Gettysburg Address was cited for piety, not dedication to equality.

As late as 1983 Kirk wrote that the Declaration “really is not conspicuously American in its ideas or phrases, and not even characteristically Jeffersonian... the Declaration was meant to

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<sup>109</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (LaSalle, I.L.: Open Court, 1974), p. 450.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 455.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., pp. 449-50.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 454.

persuade the Court of France and the *philosophes* of Paris that the Americans were sufficiently un-English to deserve military assistance. Jefferson's Declaration is a successful instrument of diplomacy ...not a work of political philosophy or an instrument of government, and Jefferson himself said little about it after 1776".<sup>113</sup> Kirk's residual distrust of equality motivated such a blunt dismissal of the Declaration. As one of the great interpreters of the Declaration in American history, Lincoln's support for this abstraction is part of the reason that he, with Jefferson, was omitted from the history of *The Conservative Mind*. By modulating Lincoln's allegiance to Jeffersonian equality and emphasising his preservation of the Union and sublime personal virtue, Kirk fashioned a conservative Lincoln that he could admire and present for emulation.

The Lincoln of Kirk's thought is an example of the traditionalist, ordered conservatism. Neither an egalitarian, nor a radical, Kirk's Lincoln was a respecter of tradition and prudential governor. He was mindful of Providence and in possession of an ontology reflective of Kirk's own. This Lincoln was elevated to Kirk's pantheon of American conservatives. "[I]n his great conservative end, the preservation of the Union, [Lincoln] succeeded". Moreover, "he might have succeeded in a conservative labour equally vast, the restoration of order and honesty, had not Booth's pistol put an end to the charity and fortitude of this uncouth, homely, melancholy, lovable man".<sup>114</sup>

Nevertheless, Lincoln was never as central to Kirk's conservative imagination as he was for others. For a thinker whose intention was to form a useable conservative history, Lincoln was far from prominent, appearing only intermittently and often peripherally in Kirk's huge body of work. Kirk's initial reaction to Lincoln was as a progressive and egalitarian. Though he went beyond this interpretation, the general paucity of Kirk's references to Lincoln suggest he that retained reservations about Lincoln. Kirk never placed him centrally as others before and after him did. Despite Lincoln's prominence in the national consciousness, in Kirk's retinue of conservative icons there was almost always a more authentic figure to present. When he did address Lincoln it was overwhelmingly to extol his character and Burke-like traits, never an in depth analysis of Lincoln's achievements. For Kirk, Lincoln could be a good model of a virtuous man but, unlike Weaver and, later, Harry Jaffa, Kirk's framework of conservatism prevented him from developing an American conservatism built on Lincoln.

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<sup>113</sup> Russell Kirk 'Introduction' in Albert J. Nock, *Mr Jefferson*, reprint ed. (Hallberg Publishing Corp., 1983).

<sup>114</sup> Kirk, "The Measure of Abraham Lincoln," <http://www.kirkcenter.org/index.php/detail/the-measure-of-abraham-lincoln/>.

Despite his personal virtues, Lincoln's historical record was simply too progressive and too bound up with equality for Kirk to embrace him tightly.

### *Harry V. Jaffa: The Ancient Lincoln*

Where Kirk's and Weaver's assessments of Lincoln were relatively minor facets of their intellectual output, the third significant interpretation of Lincoln in the 1950s to impact the right was a far more extensive analysis of the president. Political philosopher Harry Jaffa (b. 1918) placed Lincoln at the centre of his philosophical universe with the publication of *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (1959). Unlike Richard Weaver and Russell Kirk, when Jaffa began writing on Lincoln it was not from an explicitly conservative outlook. Having previously voted for Adlai Stevenson and John F. Kennedy, Jaffa shifted rightward after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, an episode he believed betrayed anti-communists.<sup>115</sup> Although, like Reagan, Jaffa approved of the New Deal, he supported Goldwater in 1964 and became a frequent contributor to *National Review* and *Modern Age*. He developed a rigorous and morally charged philosophy around Lincoln; one that differed from that of both Kirk and the emerging *National Review* position, but was prefigured somewhat in Richard Weaver's thought.<sup>116</sup> Jaffa's longevity and pugnacity in defending Lincoln's status within conservative circles makes him tremendously influential for the conservative movement's relationship with the Great Emancipator.<sup>117</sup>

Having studied English Literature at Yale, Jaffa entered the graduate programme at the New School for Social Research where he was one of German-Jewish émigré political philosopher Leo Strauss's earliest doctoral students. Although over his lifetime Jaffa's thought deviated in some ways from his mentor's, his time with Strauss and the thirty year friendship that followed was essential to the tenor of his conservatism and his extended engagement with Abraham Lincoln.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> John J. Miller, "The House of Jaffa: The Remarkable Career of a Scholar Still at Work," *National Review* vol. LXV, no. 12 (2013), p. 34.

<sup>116</sup> The comparison between the two should not be overstated: Jaffa was aware of Richard Weaver but was not influenced directly by his thought. Leo Strauss was and remains his main influence.

<sup>117</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1959), pp. 183-409.

<sup>118</sup> Jaffa would dispute the characterisation of his thought as having *deviated* from his mentor's. He considers himself the closest follower of Strauss and a champion of his legacy.

Much has been made of the enigmatic Strauss and his philosophy.<sup>119</sup> Raised in an orthodox Jewish family in turn of the century Germany, Strauss's intellectual formation was thoroughly grounded in the trends of the era, working with Cassirer, Husserl, and Heidegger. He left Germany for Paris in 1932, before immigrating to England and then, in 1938, the United States. He taught at the New School for a decade before taking his most influential appointment at the University of Chicago in 1949. Congruent with his philosophy, many of Strauss's published works were commentaries on Classical texts.<sup>120</sup>

The collapse of the Weimar Republic into the Third Reich left an indelible mark on Strauss. The apparent failure of liberalism and liberal political regimes in the face of tyranny indicated a "crisis of modernity". "The crisis... consists in the fact... that modern western man no longer knows what he wants – that he no longer believes that he can know what is good and bad, what is right and wrong".<sup>121</sup> Modern society is unable to affirm or believe anything as true and such moral and philosophical paralysis prevents human excellence and virtue as it paves the way to nihilism and tyranny.

Modernity must be understood in contrast to the thought of the Ancients and the confluence of Athens and Jerusalem. The classical thought of Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle provided a sure defence against nihilism while revealed religion, particularly Judaism, had a similar capacity. Both understood that there existed a hierarchy of goods, a place for human excellence, and personal and societal virtue. In a similar way to Richard Weaver, Strauss argued that there had been a point of severance between the Ancients and the Moderns with catastrophic effects for humanity. For Strauss it was Machiavelli that made the decisive break by undermining Platonic political philosophy. By lowering the threshold of "good"

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<sup>119</sup> Rumours and controversy abound Strauss and his students. The reasons revolve around the activities of his students and alleged students. There was considerable public and academic furor around Strauss acolyte, Allen Bloom's, bestselling *Closing of the American Mind*. More provocatively, Strauss has been associated with the "neocon agenda" of the George W. Bush Administration and the War in Iraq. He and his ideas have been interpreted as key intellectual influences on those within the administration advocating the war. The most notable academic Strauss critique is Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (London, UK: Macmillan Press, 1988), the first of several works on Strauss that purports to unpack the crypto-Nietzschean bellicosity embedded in his work. A number of rebuttals of Drury's work have been produced by Straussian or Straussian sympathetic scholars, notably Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), Peter Minowitz, *Straussophobia: Defending Leo Strauss and Straussians against Shadia Drury and Other Accusers* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2009), and Harry V. Jaffa, "Dear Professor Drury," *Political Theory* vol. 15, no. 3 (1987), each attempting to articulate the "real" Strauss.

<sup>120</sup> Steven B. Smith, "Philosophy as a Way of Life: The Case of Leo Strauss," in *Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: Authors and Arguments*, ed. Catherine Zuckert (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 61-2.

<sup>121</sup> Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity (1959)," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 81.



governance, Machiavelli eliminated the role of fortune in the emergence of good regimes. Thomas Hobbes subsequently elevated the basest human need, that of preservation, to be the paramount consideration of politics. The cultivation of virtue was disregarded for mere survival and natural law replaced by basic rights. Rousseau engendered the notion of a developing human nature and, with it, historicist ethics. Finally, Nietzsche reached the ultimate conclusion of modernity: that power is the final arbiter, not truth, good, or virtue.<sup>122</sup>

Strauss held that a return to ancient thought, or aspects of it, was necessary to overcome the failings of modernity. To that end the ancient philosophers ought to be read with the utmost seriousness. In classical thought, the best life is lived in accordance with nature. If the defining aspect of man's nature is reason, the ideal life is one of philosophic reflection. In practice, constitutional democracy is the political arrangement most amenable to philosophy, but democracy is only sustainable when the body politic possesses a strong moral basis. To foster virtue, and thereby allow for philosophy, Strauss advocated both religious and liberal education and the need for "gentlemen-statesmen" to inculcate the masses with moral propriety. To uncover the transcendent moral hierarchy, Strauss argued that political philosophy was the most fertile ground for its discovery.<sup>123</sup>

While working with Strauss, Jaffa imbibed the bifurcation of ancient and modern, the overwhelming preference for the former, and a methodology of subjecting texts to extremely close readings. He also absorbed Strauss's qualified praise for constitutional democracy and the United States, and his reverence for "magnanimous" statesmen. Crucially, Strauss's belief in a universally applicable hierarchy of goods and repugnance toward "relativism" and "nihilism" confirmed and strengthened Jaffa's own convictions. Jaffa's intention became to develop "a political science of natural right" and in doing so he brought Straussian methods and prejudices to the study of Lincoln and the Civil War.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., pp. 81-98.

<sup>123</sup> Smith, "Philosophy as a Way of Life: The Case of Leo Strauss," pp. 61-79. For further explication of the variety of interpretations of the philosophy of Leo Strauss see: Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Search for a Post Liberal Order* (Lawrence, KN: University Press of Kansas, 1996), Paul Edward Gottfried, *Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement: A Critical Appraisal* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Kenneth L. Deutsch, "Leo Strauss's Friendly Criticism of American Liberal Democracy," in *The Dilemmas of American Conservatism*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Ethan Fishman (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), and Harry V. Jaffa, "Crisis of the Strauss Divided: The Legacy Reconsidered," *Social Research* vol. 54, no. 3 (1987), pp. 579-603.

<sup>124</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. vi.

In Lincoln Jaffa discovered the great American and quintessential Straussian statesman. Lincoln became the centre of his intellectual career: the Founders, Locke, and America were each interpreted and reinterpreted through a Lincolnian lens. Within the conservative movement he had success using the president to articulate his own Straussian-Jaffaite philosophy of strident moral purpose. The gulf between Jaffa's morally charged conservatism and the thought of his conservative allies created tension within the movement. Jaffa's disputatious nature led him to debate virtually every variety of conservative thinker over his half century in the movement.<sup>125</sup> In these debates, Lincoln almost always featured prominently and several turned on the man himself.

Jaffa's long engagement with Lincoln began with *Crisis of the House Divided*, the influential study of the Lincoln-Douglas debates and perhaps the most highly-regarded product of Strauss's first wave of students' initial output.<sup>126</sup> Jaffa sought to rebut the revisionist interpretation of the Civil War that saw it as a needless conflict. The revisionists faulted Lincoln for inflaming the supposedly repressible tension between the North and South.<sup>127</sup> Jaffa's analysis broke ground by taking Lincoln and Douglas seriously as thinkers and approaching their arguments as principled, rather than motivated by political expediency. He distinguished Lincoln from Douglas to explain why Lincoln, the divisive figure, should have defeated the nationally palatable Douglas. At its heart, Jaffa claimed, the Lincoln-Douglas debate was a difference of moral epistemologies. The exchanges, he observed, mirrored almost exactly those of Socrates and Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*. Lincoln affirmed a transcendent notion of justice while Douglas agnostically favoured a solution that equated justice with the popular will. By his close reading of the debates, Jaffa suggested a philosophical sophistication in both Lincoln and Douglas that had previously been overlooked.

Lincoln emerges in Jaffa's work as a morally and intellectually serious philosopher-statesman prepared to lead the nation in dedicating itself to justice. In explicitly Straussian terms, Jaffa's Lincoln was needed by America to imbue the nation with classical truth to overcome the grave moral failures of its modernity.

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<sup>125</sup> Robert H. Bork, *A Time to Speak: Selected Writings and Arguments* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), p. 334. Bork wrote, listing Jaffa's opponents, that they included "Jeane Kirkpatrick, Irving Kristol, Edwin Meese, Russell Kirk, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., William Rehnquist, and, I rejoice to say, given the company to which I am assigned, me."

<sup>126</sup> Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, p. 239.

<sup>127</sup> Jaffa, *Crisis*, pp. 19-27.

Governed by justice, Lincoln was firmly grounded in natural right. He viewed Douglas's doctrine of popular sovereignty over slavery in the territories as a moral disaster.<sup>128</sup> Lincoln interpreted the moral vacuity of popular sovereignty as a burning example of the crisis of modernity. At Peoria he declared:

I can not but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world – enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites – causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty – Criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but *self-interest*.<sup>129</sup>

Reduced to its most basic elements the debate was a matter of positivism against the natural moral order. Jaffa's Lincoln stood for the universality of the Declaration of Independence. "For Lincoln", Jaffa wrote, "there was indeed 'only one issue', but that issue was whether or not the American people should believe that 'all men are created equal' in the full extent and true significance of that proposition".<sup>130</sup> "True significance" meant that "all men created equal" was the central proposition of America; the proposition from which all other principles spring forth.<sup>131</sup>

The inalienable right of equality stemmed from the Founders' Lockean inheritance. In his reading of Locke, Jaffa followed Strauss's controversial interpretation that construed the philosopher as a veiled Hobbes. The explicit or *exoteric* Locke was a thinker reconciled with Aristotelian and Christian thought. Beneath this false exterior, Strauss suggested, laid an atheistic Hobbesian philosophy.<sup>132</sup> By the Founders' employment of the esoteric Hobbesian-Locke, the Founding had been an event steeped in modernity. The equality promised by the Declaration was a negative and foundational right based on the state of nature to be moved away from as civil society developed. Jaffa argued that Lincoln affirmed this understanding of equality and added a powerful normative dimension. "Lincoln's interpretation of human equality... is that every man had an equal right to be treated justly, that just treatment is a

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., pp. 302-8, 347-61.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 309.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, pp. 129, 250-1. For the Zuckerts' unpacking of Jaffa's argument in *Crisis* and the course of its development over the course of his life see pp. 217-27, 239-52.

matter of intrinsic worth”.<sup>133</sup> Lincoln established that the test of a government’s legitimacy was no longer whether a regime was despotic or not, but whether it was good and just; “a government which may be loved and revered” because it augments “the happiness and value of life to all people of all colours everywhere”. He supplanted the modern errors of the United States by entrenching an interpretation of “all men created equal” that “transform[ed] that proposition from a pre-political, negative, minimal, and merely revolutionary norm, a norm which prescribes what civil society ought *not* to be, into a transcendental affirmation of what it *ought* to be”.<sup>134</sup> In effect, Lincoln partially overturned the modernity of the American regime.

Jaffa came to view Lincoln as a great statesman of the Straussian mould. Strauss prized moderation as the supreme political virtue and Jaffa’s Lincoln was a beacon of moderation.<sup>135</sup> He stood, firmly, for the natural good of equality on a philosophic and public level, while remaining a model of prudent and restrained leadership. At every turn he sought to uphold the Constitution despite its enshrinement of the inherently unjust slavery. He was troubled by ideological abolitionism – since it meant the overthrow of the Constitution – and disavowed the fanaticism of John Browne. He was critical of utopianism in both the temperance and abolition movements, “impatient at the imperfections of man’s states”.<sup>136</sup> Instead of utopianism, Lincoln sought to impart clear morals to the public and secure them in a civic religion. This moral programme reached its apogee in the Gettysburg Address, the centrepiece of the Second Founding, where Lincoln affirmed that the nation was “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”. This wise, prudent, constitutionally minded statesman, bestowed with abiding moral consistency, was every bit the magnanimous statesman of America.

Furthermore, Lincoln understood the crisis of modernity and sought to surmount it. By transforming the Declaration of Independence and consecrating its new meaning in the public imagination through the sacrifice of the Civil War, Lincoln became the saviour of not only the Union, but America itself. He was the ultimate statesman-philosopher, succeeding in instilling the ancient thought of the transfigured Declaration of Independence in the modern regime of America. No mere renewal of dedication to the Declaration, Lincoln’s move was sheer transcendence.

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<sup>133</sup> Jaffa, *Crisis*, p. 320.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>135</sup> Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, p. 230.

<sup>136</sup> Jaffa, *Crisis*, p. 271.

The Lincoln Jaffa presented is an appealing figure: wise and gentle, dedicated to the equality of man. Strauss “knew that the perfect political order was not now possible; but the great-souled man was not only possible but actual” and Jaffa believed Lincoln to be an Aristotelian great-souled aristocrat.<sup>137</sup> Lincoln “is a man of few but great actions”; he “seems to have concentrated his whole inner life upon preparing for the crisis foretold in the Lyceum speech”.<sup>138</sup> His genius was to unite aristocratic magnanimity with the “cause of the people”. “The work of the Founding Fathers was excellent and noble, but it was incomplete”.<sup>139</sup> By sacramentalising the war as a form of ritual atonement Lincoln, established a political religion based on the truth of equality. He saved the Union from being rent by secession and liberated the nation from the unintended philosophical failings of the inescapably modern Founders. In supplanting the Hobbesian-Lockean understanding of equality and natural rights with a proscriptive version, Lincoln brought virtue to the American regime and, in doing so, surpassed in greatness even the magnificent Founding Fathers. Lincoln did not overturn the modernism of the regime, but imbued the nation with enough ancient virtue to make it viable, even good.

In a strange interlude Jaffa also argues that Lincoln endorsed equality as politically, if not literally, true. The so-called Aristotelian justification of equality is in contrast to the more prominent version of equality Jaffa used in *Crisis* that held equality as transcendent truth with an attendant Kantianesque imperative. In their analysis of Jaffa’s thought, Catherine and Michael Zuckert note, rightly, that he introduced and then passed over this theme. They argue Jaffa presents an exceptionally attractive Lincoln, but one both historically implausible and philosophically problematic. In justifying the need for Aristotle’s thought in contemporary America, Jaffa needed to emphasise the Aristotelian conception of equality. His concurrent aim of demonstrating the moral degeneracy of modernity, exemplified by Popular Sovereignty, required him to emphasise the universality of the Declaration’s equality clause and effectively avoid discussion that undermined the clause’s transcendence. The result, as the Zuckerts put it, is “Lincoln’s vacillating and momentary Lockeanism, Kantianism, and Aristotelianism”.<sup>140</sup> Jaffa essentially had two different meanings of equality in *Crisis*. Which of these he used depended on the philosophical and rhetorical situation at hand.

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<sup>137</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, “The Legacy of Leo Strauss,” *The Claremont Review of Books* vol. III, no. 3 (1984), p. 20.

<sup>138</sup> Jaffa, *Crisis*, p. 219.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>140</sup> Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, p. 224.

The Zuckerts raise several other questions about *Crisis*. Their most germane criticisms address Jaffa's fidelity, or lack thereof, to Aristotle and Locke. They argue that his supposedly Aristotelian arguments on honour and magnanimity diverge significantly from Aristotle's positions. Jaffa suggests that the magnanimous aristocrat rejects honour, yet Aristotle taught that magnanimity meant the correct ordering of virtue and honour. Rather than reject honour, Aristotle's magnanimous man recognises it as his reward for great virtue. As Jaffa's student and prominent figure in the Jaffaite "West Coast Straussian" school, Charles Kesler, has argued, Jaffa's is not an unadulterated Aristotelian aristocrat but rather one interpreted through Christianity.<sup>141</sup> In his presentation of Locke, Jaffa argues that his conception of equality was a basic foundation for civil society with no attendant duties. The Zuckerts respond that neither Locke nor the Founders understood natural rights as having no correlative duties; the equality of the state of nature retains significant value in civil society.<sup>142</sup> The distortions in *Crisis* are in large part due to the difficulty Jaffa had in reconciling aspects of his project with his devotion to Strauss and his methods. As a naturally patriotic and conservative thinker, Jaffa's Americanism led him to view America and American history, often through the interpretive lens of Abraham Lincoln, as more laudable than Strauss or other Straussians had been willing to do.

Jaffa placed Lincoln at the centre of his political thought and his interpretation developed significantly from *Crisis*. The course of this evolution is addressed in succeeding chapters but the basis of his use of Lincoln is clear from his earliest work. Lincoln is the hero, the central figure, in the grand sweep of American history. He is its saviour and restorer; an aristocratic statesman-philosopher who brought classical thought to America, and who stands for equality and right moral ordering. Lincoln is Jaffa's ideal and idealised statesman. A conservative leader: magnanimous and prudential yet ready to defend natural right against the encroachment of nihilism. Jaffa's admiration and love of Lincoln shines through his writing with a ringing moral earnestness. He represents the belief in transcendent truths and readiness to stand for the true instead of the convenient.

In his written work, Lincoln is Jaffa's sword and shield; an inbuilt example of his thought and, by default, the foremost spokesperson of his philosophy. Jaffa frequently quotes Lincoln to illustrate or defend his arguments. As he understands it, his political philosophy is one and the same with Lincoln's and his career has been deepening his understanding of Lincoln's

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 224-6.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

thought and actions in light of the Founding. Jaffa did not believe he was arguing the case for Lincoln but rather re-presenting Lincoln's own powerfully true arguments to the modern audience.<sup>143</sup>

Jaffa's advocacy of Lincoln amongst conservatives is the fulfilment of the mission he believes Strauss entrusted to him: the return of "natural right" to civic life. In a candid distillation of his aims Jaffa wrote: "I believe that Strauss believed that my restoration of Lincoln was the most apt way to restore the... authority [of the self-evident truths of the Declaration], and that this was the form in which the statesmanship of classical political philosophy might become authoritative in our world. While Strauss articulated the connection between Plato, biblical religion, and medieval political philosophy, to discover the presence of classical principles in the post-classical world, he propelled my articulation of the connection between Plato, biblical religion, Shakespeare, and Lincoln".<sup>144</sup> In a similar but far more comprehensive way to Richard Weaver, Lincoln was Jaffa's tool to illustrate the necessity of natural right to the modern political world.

Observers of the Straussian project, both sympathetic and otherwise, have been critical of Jaffa's deviations from Strauss's thought. A major criticism had been of his conflation, through Lincoln, of the Declaration of Independence and *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>145</sup> *Crisis of the House Divided* did not break with Strauss *per se*, but Jaffa's patriotism led him to push back against Strauss's designation of the United States as a modern regime. Jaffa concluded that the enshrinement of natural right in the public imagination by Lincoln mitigated or extenuated the modernity of the United States. This belief or an extension of it became the backbone of "West Coast Straussianism", an influential school dedicated to guiding conservatism in line with the "[F]ounders' statesmanship, our citizens' loyalty to the Declaration and Constitution, and the scenes, both tender and proud, of our national history".<sup>146</sup> Strauss was an admirer, with qualification, of America. Jaffa's marriage of Straussian thought and methodology with overwhelming patriotism has had a considerable impact on the intellectual framework of the conservative movement. Moreover, their propagation of Lincoln as the hero of American history has done much to ensure his place in the modern conservative pantheon, though not without challenge.

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<sup>143</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, Phone Conversation, March 14 2013.

<sup>144</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "Strauss at 100," *Claremont Institute* (2003), [http://www.claremont.org/publications/pubid.269/pub\\_detail.asp#](http://www.claremont.org/publications/pubid.269/pub_detail.asp#).

<sup>145</sup> Robert P. Kraynak, "Moral Order in the Western Tradition: Harry Jaffa's Grand Synthesis of Athens, Jerusalem, and Peoria," *The Review of Politics* vol. 71, no. 2 (2009), p. 189.

<sup>146</sup> Charles Kesler, "A Decade of CRB," *Claremont Review of Books* vol. XI, no. 1 & 2 (2011), p. 7.

*Crisis of the House Divided* was well received, if not widely read. It introduced a more complex analysis of the Lincoln-Douglas debates than had previously been attempted. Along with Don Fehrenbacher's *Prelude to Greatness* it has been credited with beginning an appreciation of Lincoln as a serious thinker. Although not written with a political agenda or from a consciously conservative perspective, *Crisis* was well regarded in conservative circles and found an appreciative audience.<sup>147</sup> Willmoore Kendall, one of *National Review*'s first senior editors, became, late in his career, enamoured with Strauss's thought. He was critical but laudatory of Jaffa's book.<sup>148</sup> Kendall's imprimatur gave Jaffa cache among the *National Review* crowd and he became the journal's on-call expert for Civil War history and Lincoln scholarship. In drawing forth Lincoln's principles of "human equality, liberty, and natural-rights-based constitutionalism", *Crisis*'s appeal to conservatives was two-fold, suggests Kesler. First, these principles were the founding principles of the Republican Party, the party conservative overwhelmingly identified with. Secondly, Lincoln's principles, so clearly articulated by Jaffa, were extraordinarily pertinent to the Cold War zeitgeist. Lincoln exposed the moral and political bankruptcy of acquiescing to a world permanently half-slave and half-free".<sup>149</sup> Lincoln, the principled anti-slavery statesman, could be easily transposed as Lincoln, the principled Cold Warrior.

Although previously a liberal Democrat, from the early '60s onward Jaffa's conservative bona fides were indisputable. His work appeared in conservative books and the major journals and he had a friendship and working relationship with William F. Buckley.<sup>150</sup> Many of Jaffa's students have been prominent on the right – the Claremont Institute and *Claremont Review of Books*, both heavily influenced by Jaffa, are self-consciously conservative. It was rumoured, correctly, that Jaffa had ghost-written Barry Goldwater's infamous "extremism in defence of liberty" speech.<sup>151</sup> But in spite of his storied position and his undoubted influence, Jaffa remains somewhat controversial on the right. His vigorous conception of conservatism and desire for the movement to "be right for the right reasons" earned him many critics.

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<sup>147</sup> Charles R. Kesler, "Harry V. Jaffa: Giving Us Lincoln," *National Review* vol. 57, no. 23 (2005), p. 108.

<sup>148</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "The Soul of Buckley," *National Review Online* (2008), <http://www.nationalreview.com/blogs/print/224105>.

<sup>149</sup> Kesler, "Harry V. Jaffa: Giving Us Lincoln," p. 108.

<sup>150</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr, ed. *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking? American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970), pp. 221-38. Buckley anthologised Jaffa's *On the Nature of Civil and Religious Liberty* in his 1970 compendium of conservative thought

<sup>151</sup> Eric Benson, "The Goldwater Campaign; Catching up with Harry Jaffa, the 94-Year-Old Historian Who Wrote, 'Extremism in the Defense of Liberty Is No Vice,'" *New York*, 22 October 2012, p. 23. At the 1964 Republican convention Jaffa wrote a memorandum that included the line, supposedly a paraphrasing of Cicero, in response to Nelson Rockefeller's pointed warnings against extremism. It reached Goldwater who had his acceptance speech drafted around the key lines



Frequently Lincoln – often as a proxy for the nature of conservatism – was the subject of his surprisingly acrimonious exchanges with fellow conservatives.

In practical politics Jaffa broadly endorsed the conservative Republican platform that included a muscular foreign policy in the face of communism, support for free market policies, and opposition to the expansion of the federal government.<sup>152</sup> On social issues he was an “embattled moralist”. Politically orthodox, the ideas Jaffa espoused and the idiom in which he expressed his philosophy – “his reasons for being right” – nevertheless appeared problematic, even contradictory, to the prevailing conservative outlook. In reviewing two of Jaffa’s works of political philosophy, *Modern Age* suggested that he “seems to be a liberal democrat” who has “associated himself with Republicans and conservatives”.<sup>153</sup> He diverged from the developing conservative consensus on universal principles in politics, the role of the government, and the place of equality in America.

Following Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* many post-war conservatives were troubled by the application of abstract theories to the complexities of the human condition. The excesses of the French and Russian Revolutions were blamed squarely on the ideological fundamentalism of the Jacobins and communists.<sup>154</sup> Russell Kirk taught that conservatism was the very negation of ideology. Jaffa’s embrace of the universal principles of the Declaration of Independence as reified by Lincoln placed him against Kirkian conservatism. Kirk never rejected moral realism but he and his followers favoured prescription and prudence over and against the implementation of “rational” programmes intended to progress toward a perfect society. Conservatism ought to be principled, and even transcendent, but never composed of policies developed in abstraction.

“Prescription, by itself,” Jaffa argued “can never serve as a foundation for political right. Prescriptive right--tradition--can be authoritative only insofar as prescription is seen as embodying some form of transcendent right.”<sup>155</sup> Conservatism must be founded, first and foremost, on transcendent truth. Jaffa was sharply critical of numerous conservative luminaries including Kirk, Antonin Scalia, Robert Bork, and Irving Kristol, for failing to

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<sup>152</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "The Party of Lincoln Vs the Party of Bureaucrats," *Claremont Institute* (1996), [http://www.claremont.org/publications/pubid.485/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.claremont.org/publications/pubid.485/pub_detail.asp) .

<sup>153</sup> Francis G. Wilson, "Politics and Literature," *Modern Age* vol. 10, no. 4 (1966), p. 124.

<sup>154</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, pp. 79-83.

<sup>155</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "Calhoun Versus Madison: The Transformation of the Thought of the Founding," in *James Madison: Philosopher and Practitioner of Liberal Democracy* (2001)., <http://www.loc.gov/loc/madison/symposium.html> .

understand the centrality of the Declaration and the principles it enshrines to America.<sup>156</sup> In turn he has been criticised for advocating right-wing moralist abstractions and a crusading utopianism.<sup>157</sup>

The second, related, divergence concerns Jaffa's arguments about the role of the government. Influenced by libertarian thought and the American tradition of liberty, the emerging conservative movement insisted on the importance of freedom from the state. Government was necessary to secure natural rights but no more. Considerable enthusiasm for conservatism had developed in response to the New Deal's expansions of the federal government.<sup>158</sup> Jaffa argued that lowering the aims of politics is part of the failed state of modernity; good regimes cultivated virtue, not just secured survival. A government cannot be indifferent to good and evil. "Lincoln is the great prophet of our tradition. He is at once the greatest of our true liberals, and the greatest of our conservatives. It was he, more than anyone, who said clearly that just government must be controlled by moral purpose, and that no counting of heads can turn right into wrong".<sup>159</sup> The central thesis of *Crisis of the House Divided* was that the horror of slavery and the moral failure of Stephen Douglas justified the rise of Lincoln and, by extension, war.<sup>160</sup> By his use of this language, conservative critics concluded that Jaffa endorsed the kind of activist government and imperial presidencies that conservatives loathed. A reading of Jaffa as endorsing vigorous state action, even war-making, in pursuit of its moral ideals could be, and was, made.<sup>161</sup>

In exalting equality, Jaffa created a third point of tension between his thought and that of his contemporaries. In *Crisis* Jaffa held that Lincoln established United States' dedication to equality as a universal principle, applicable at all times and in all places: the "central idea' from which all its minor thoughts radiate".<sup>162</sup> The Declaration and specifically the preamble gave meaning to the American founding and regime.<sup>163</sup> This was a startling argument for Jaffa to make since anti-communism was the vital galvanising force in the development of

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<sup>156</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "The False Prophets of American Conservatism," in *Claremont Institute Lincoln Day Conference* (1998), [http://www.claremont.org/publications/pubid.670/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.claremont.org/publications/pubid.670/pub_detail.asp).

<sup>157</sup> Paul Edward Gottfried, *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 18-21, 25-6, 102-6.

<sup>158</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, pp. 1-49.

<sup>159</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "Lincoln and the Cause of Freedom," in *The Conditions of Freedom: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 257.

<sup>160</sup> Jaffa, *Crisis*, pp. 23-37.

<sup>161</sup> Gottfried, *Conservatism in America*, p. 20. Willmoore Kendall's critique of *Crisis*, dealt with below, touches on this charge.

<sup>162</sup> Jaffa, *Crisis*, p. 309.

<sup>163</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "Kendall & Carey: The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition " *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review* vol. 8, no. 2 (1975), pp. 467-7.

conservatism and conservatives perceived “equality” as a “god-term” of progressive liberalism. Remarkably, Jaffa presented his thesis at a conference dedicated to the future direction of conservatism under the title “Equality as a Conservative Virtue”. Until this point, it had been clear that equality was manifestly *not* a conservative value. Liberty rather than equality was the central proposition of America.<sup>164</sup> Willmoore Kendall cautioned *National Review* readers to be wary of the implications of Jaffa’s thought. Kendall feared “a series of Abraham Lincolns, each persuaded that he is superior in wisdom and virtue to the Fathers, each prepared to insist that those who oppose this or that new application of the equality standard are denying the possibility of self-government”. This mentality, he argued, would always lead to war. The end-point of Jaffa’s progressive Lincolnian successors was the “cooperative commonwealth of men who will be so equal that no one will be able to tell them apart”.<sup>165</sup> Jaffa rejected the notion that he or Lincoln supported anything like a socialist equality. Far from egalitarianism, Jaffa claimed he meant a Lincolnian equality of opportunity, not outcome.<sup>166</sup>

As a thinker, conservative, and proponent of Lincoln, Jaffa was rigorous and demanding. He deviated both from Straussian and conservative articles of faith when his line of reasoning led him to. His determination for philosophical coherence led Buckley to quip that “[i]f you think Harry Jaffa is hard to argue with, try agreeing with him; it is nearly impossible”.<sup>167</sup> Throughout the sixty year or so history of conservatism, Harry Jaffa has been the most visible and consistent proponent of Lincoln and a conservatism founded on Lincolnian principles. Jaffa’s Lincoln and his conservatism are inexorably linked; two sides of the same coin. Despite his reference to common conservative principles, at its core, Jaffa’s Lincoln represents a very different form of conservatism from that of many of his contemporaries in the 1960s and ‘70s.<sup>168</sup> He stood for the morally robust Jaffaite-Straussian conservatism then peculiar to himself and his disciples.

Jaffa was often successful in defending Lincoln’s standing within conservative circles. He wrote in broadly the same idiom, the same journals, and shared their social and political beliefs. Nevertheless, suspicions remained around both him and Lincoln. Until the movement

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<sup>164</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, pp. 344-7.

<sup>165</sup> Willmoore Kendall, "Source of American Caesarism: Review of Crisis of the House Divided," *National Review* vol. 47, no. 23 (1995), p. 124.

<sup>166</sup> Jaffa, "Kendall & Carey: The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition ", pp. 489-505.

<sup>167</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr. in "Foreword" from Harry V. Jaffa, *American Conservatism and the American Founding* (Durham, NC: North Carolina Academic Press, 1982), p. xi.

<sup>168</sup> As shall be seen, Jaffa’s conservatism is markedly different from the likes of Frank Meyer and Willmoore Kendall. Two rivals for the intellectual foundation for American conservative political theory.

came to accept the philosophic precepts of Jaffaite conservatism – in particular equality and virtue based governance – or until Lincoln was presented in more traditionally conservative terms, the right's relationship with Lincoln would continue to have an ambiguous streak.

When Weaver, Kirk, and Jaffa wrote their earliest works on Lincoln, conservatism as a social and political force was imperfectly formed. While Weaver hoped to use Lincoln as an exemplar of a politics of principle for the overly pragmatic Republican Party and Kirk had a modest role in Michigan Republican politics, they were far more critics of modern society than genuine political operatives. Likewise, Jaffa's thought placed an emphasis on political philosophy but his starting point was modernity's inability to distinguish wrong from right. His foundational critique, like Strauss, was in many ways a cultural and intellectual one.

The primary argument of the post-war traditionalists was that at the moment the West was called to defend itself against evil, the liberal order had defaulted. The traditionalists sought the (re)establishment of absolute moral precepts in society – “a bulwark of ideas, tradition, and truth” against evil and the corrosive effects of relativism.<sup>169</sup> Lincoln appealed to the traditionalists because they interpreted him as an authentic and American counter-example to the modern moral degradation and challenge to the Establishment's malaise. For Richard Weaver and Harry Jaffa, Lincoln was the ideal symbol of absolute principles against relativism. Weaver's Lincoln was the great Republican and American standard for timeless ideals; the vehicle through which, by emulation, society might restore its moral mind. Jaffa's Lincoln, too, stood as a model for modern men, but Jaffa also believed that the historic Lincoln meliorated the modernity of American by endowing the nation with a political religion predicated on the “ancient” thought of the Declaration transfigured. Lincoln's principled stand against slavery and his opposition of the compromised solution of Popular Sovereignty, coupled with the poetic rhetoric of principle and syllogism made him a powerful image in defence of absolutes, all the more so because of his role in one of the great moral victories of American history.

This conclusion, however, was not recognised by all. Kirk, like Weaver and Jaffa, believed in an objective morality and the failure of liberalism, but emphasised order and continuity. In light of his gradualism, his scepticism over Lincoln and lifelong reluctance to champion Lincoln too straightforwardly followed from his conservative philosophy. Nevertheless,

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<sup>169</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, p. 83.

Lincoln's personal virtue and moral uprightness won regard from Kirk and a small but respected place in his writings.

For those conservatives whose concern for moral epistemologies was at the centre of their thought, Lincoln was a useful, even powerful symbol. In the post-war years, morally driven traditionalism was a useful motivator of would-be conservatives and Lincoln appealed to this impulse. At a time when conservatism was "bookless" and only beginning to articulate its message, the ability to point to Lincoln as a symbol was valuable.

The traditionalists were eager to refute the criticism that their political views were un-American and sought to demonstrate the existence of an American conservative pedigree; to show that conservative principles were derived from American history. Working through the legacy of President Lincoln was a part of this search for a history useable by the conservative cause. Lincoln's recognition and popularity meant that identifying the conservative cause with him was a step toward respectability. His image as an American success became useful in establishing a new conservative genealogy and justifying conservatism. In the search for a useable heritage, Jaffa played a crucial role: Kesler writes "*Crisis of the House Divided* brought to sight Lincoln's greatness. It reminded conservatives that noble political actions are possible within democracy, and that democracy itself sometimes demands them, from statesmen, soldiers, and ordinary citizens alike. In other words, citizens seeking something worth conserving didn't have to pine for long-ago, far-away aristocracy, or for transplanted truths".<sup>170</sup> Lincoln, Jaffa thought, was the very soul of American conservatism.

There was a degree of political consideration in the appropriation of Lincoln. The Republican Party of the mid-twentieth century continued to conceive of itself as the party of Lincoln. By presenting Lincoln as a politician of immense principle, the traditionalists' implicit, and occasionally explicit, message to the Republican Party was a call to restore principle to the political platform: to become a party of principle, as it had been under Lincoln. Lincoln served as a standard bearer for Republican traditionalists and a call to conscience for the wider party.

At this stage in its development, conservatism was in reality a blend of various and competing challenges to the liberal consensus. As conservative anti-liberals, the work of Kirk, Weaver, and Jaffa – at times radically different – occasionally sits together

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<sup>170</sup> Kesler, "Harry V. Jaffa: Giving Us Lincoln," p. 109.

uncomfortably. As it emerged as a political and intellectual movement, the political element of conservatism became a priority alongside its moral one. Organising the three strands of conservatism into an electorally viable and coherent philosophy became a matter of urgency. When those theorists interested in the political nature and future of the conservative movement wrote about Lincoln, it was not Lincoln as symbolic statesman, but Lincoln as a political figure – one with a verifiable political record. Such men, *National Review* senior editors Willmoore Kendall and Frank Meyer chief among them, venerated the Framers of the Constitution and the United States experiment in “ordered liberty”. As much as Lincoln was a moral symbol and Republican icon, they found plenty in the sixteenth president’s politics and impact on America’s political institutions to trouble them deeply.

## Modern Copperheads: An Anti-Lincoln Challenge

The 1960s are remembered for the entrance of social and political radicalism into mass culture, but these years were also fruitful ones for the emerging conservative movement. Conservatives still largely conceived of themselves as members of a beleaguered remnant but during this decade they began to find an audience. *National Review*'s circulation, thirty thousand in 1960, had more than trebled by 1965, surpassing a hundred thousand by 1970.<sup>171</sup> In 1962 William F. Buckley's new twice-weekly column began circulation in 32 papers; by 1970 it appeared in over 300 papers nationally.<sup>172</sup> Within the Republican Party, Senator Barry Goldwater had become the leading representative of conservatism in politics. His manifesto, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, published in 1960 (and ghost-written by Buckley's brother-in-law, L. Brent Bozell), was a national bestseller. Nixon won the 1960 presidential nomination but Goldwater made an impressive showing and, after a tightly contested race, was the Republican presidential nominee in 1964. Goldwater's White house bid was based on conservative principles and, while Lyndon Johnson defeated him in a landslide, the campaign was a watershed moment for conservatism in both the Republican Party and the nation at large. The movement's early intellectual lights, the likes of Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, and Friedrich Hayek, had entered the public square to protest the direction of the nation.<sup>173</sup> Since their entry into public discourse, however, conservatives had made strides toward forming a genuine movement with a political and cultural voice. Their challenge was to present a coherent alternative to the prevailing New Deal liberalism.

As George Nash has outlined, the conservatives contended with allegations that their outlook was European and alien to the United States.<sup>174</sup> Adding fuel to this claim was that where America's "Old Right" had been a largely Protestant domain, many of the leading new conservative intellectuals, particularly at *National Review*, were or became Roman Catholics. The Catholic turn in post-war conservatism manifested itself especially in the movement's emphasis on locating themselves and the United States within a wider tradition of "the

<sup>171</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, p. 463.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Peele, "American Conservatism in Historical Perspective," pp. 19-24.

<sup>174</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, p. 338.

West”.<sup>175</sup> This broader “Western” perspective and the prevalence of Catholics in a still largely Protestant nation lent itself to the criticism that conservatism was an un-American phenomenon, giving urgency to the conservative search for an indigenous heritage.<sup>176</sup> By the end of the 1950s conservatives had developed several methods of countering this charge. With Richard Weaver and Harry Jaffa, and to a lesser extent Russell Kirk, the employment of Abraham Lincoln was a part of this strategy. Lincoln was used as a symbol of an indigenous conservatism and deployed in defence of conservative values. By the mid-1960s the conservative line, advanced by increasingly prominent public figures and in journals like *National Review* and *Modern Age*, was composed of a series of conservative themes. American values were articulated as a part of the “timeless” principles drawn from the accumulated wisdom of the West: natural law and Christian revelation, the need for a small state and liberty under law.<sup>177</sup> From this perspective, the South was looked to as a “nonliberal bulwark against the rising radical tide”.<sup>178</sup>

Gradually, from the competing anti-liberal voices an “orthodoxy” or mainstream emerged and was presented as indigenous and “venerable”. Informed variously by the libertarian Albert Nock’s view of the state as the enemy and José Ortega y Gasset’s notion of a revolt against the masses, the conservatism of the early 1960s was largely anti-majoritarian. The movement harboured deep suspicions about centralisation and the dangers of “plebiscitary democracy”. It was distrustful of abstract political theories and radical “liberals in a hurry”, and hostile toward the accumulation of power, whether in electoral majorities, “imperial” presidencies, or the Supreme Court. Conservatives perceived themselves as defending high culture and bourgeois mores against mass culture; standing for what they saw as the lasting achievements of Western civilization. In politics, they adopted a similar posture of resistance. They sought to conserve freedom, private property, and the sovereignty of the states against the state and the “tyranny of majority”.<sup>179</sup> For a number of conservative intellectuals, including Frank Meyer and Willmoore Kendall, this was in line with the tradition of the Founding Fathers, set forth in the Constitution and illuminated by the *Federalist Papers*. As a

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<sup>175</sup> Allitt, *The Conservatives*, p. 180. The relationship between Catholicism and conservatism in America has been addressed in Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals & Conservative Politics in America: 1950-1985* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). Prominent Catholics included William F. Buckley, L. Brent Bozell, Frank Meyer, Willmoore Kendall, James Burnham, Garry Wills, Russell Kirk, and Jeffrey Hart – many converted as adults.

<sup>176</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, pp. 119-20.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.



voice for the “conservative mainstream”, Frank Meyer was one of the foremost proponents of this interpretation of America’s past.<sup>180</sup>

The emergent orthodoxy did not preclude the existence alternative perspectives. There remained a libertarian movement outside of conservatism and elements of the Old Right continued on, critical of the conservatives’ close embrace of capitalism and demands for active foreign policy. Within the conservative movement itself, Nash identifies two major dissenting positions with different conceptions of government. The first, the Straussian school – represented by Harry Jaffa, Walter Berns, and other of Strauss’s students – held a classical interpretation of the role of the state as a body to cultivate virtue amongst its citizens. Influenced to a degree by the Straussian approach but otherwise unique, the political theorist Willmoore Kendall proposed a majoritarian conservatism at odds with the mainline conservative position.<sup>181</sup> The point, however, is that while conservatism lacked complete internal coherence in its intellectual foundations, on a practical level of activism, the movement made considerable strides toward political and social legitimacy.

Very different claims about the role of government and the American tradition were embedded in the conservative thinkers’ competing foundations for political action. Meyer, Kendall, and Jaffa assessed Lincoln and his legacy in the context of America. Strikingly, both Meyer and Kendall challenged Lincoln’s place in history outright. They, for separate reasons, rejected Lincoln’s influence as a grievous distortion of the true American tradition. When both of these respected conservatives made public disavowals of the president, Harry Jaffa defended Lincoln as both an American and conservative great, albeit from Jaffa’s own ontologically distinct conception of conservatism. The resulting debates, ostensibly over the historical Lincoln, drew on the three thinkers’ very different political theories, historical interpretations, and core values. The Lincoln question hovered above the deeper struggles over the intellectual foundations of American conservatism that took place during the turbulent 1960s and ‘70s.

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<sup>180</sup> In 1969 Meyer edited a collection of essays by conservative thinkers. He titled it *The Conservative Mainstream* and attempted to fashion a consensus..

<sup>181</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, pp. 341-94.

### *Frank S. Meyer: The Centralising Lincoln*

In practice establishing a coherent conservatism in the early '60s meant formulating a functional synthesis of the libertarian and traditionalist impulses and developing a workable conservative political doctrine. Of the conservatives, *National Review* senior-editor Frank Meyer, one of several prominent ex-communists in the movement, came closest to establishing, and then hewing to, a party line. Born in Newark, 1909, Meyer briefly attended Princeton before studying at Balliol College, Oxford. Drawn to both Marxism and the Catholic philosophy of his tutor, Martin D'Arcy, Meyer joined the Communist Party in the early 1930s and, at the Party's bidding, did graduate work at the London School of Economics.<sup>182</sup> Returning to the United States, Meyer taught communist thought while attending the University of Chicago. He enlisted for military service during the Second World War but was discharged for medical reasons. During the war Meyer came to reject communism, breaking from the party in 1945.<sup>183</sup> Like fellow former communists Whittaker Chambers and James Burnham, Meyer became an ardent critic of his former political faith. Meyer wrote political works and aided FBI anti-communist investigations from his relatively secluded home in upstate New York. At *National Review* Meyer succeeded Willmoore Kendall as editor of the magazine's book review section.<sup>184</sup> The language of communist dogmatism, however, never left Meyer completely: his monthly column was titled "Principles and Heresies".<sup>185</sup>

Taking the task of developing a coherent conservative creed upon himself, Meyer's major intellectual output attempted to balance traditionalism with libertarianism. He held that, ultimately, freedom must be the end of politics. Political theory required radical emphasis on the individual. The quasi-theological title of his column was apt, for, at a foundational level, Meyer believed that conservatism could not function without a basis in principles and their clear articulation. He rejected Russell Kirk's "conservatism of prescription as a negative philosophy, incapable of standing for right and actualising its belief in the integrity of mankind. Logically it meant "whatever is, is right".<sup>186</sup> Meyer acknowledged that Kirk was no blind preserver but in fact wished to conserve "the particular strand of tradition which

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<sup>182</sup> Hart, *The Making of the Conservative Mind*, pp. 44-5.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Garry Wills, *Confessions of a Conservative* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 41.

<sup>185</sup> Hart, *The Making of the Conservative Mind*, p. 44.

<sup>186</sup> Frank S. Meyer, "Collectivism Rebaptized (1955)," in *In Defense of Freedom and Related Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1996), pp. 9-10.

appealed to him”.<sup>187</sup> But, “[t]he conscious conservatism of a revolutionary or postrevolutionary era faces problems inconceivable to the natural conservatism of a prerevolutionary time”.<sup>188</sup> Instead of “affirming” the existent liberalism, conservatives must “select and adjudge”. Selecting and judging rightly, with reference to the collected wisdom of Western civilisation, *was* conservatism. In politics, practical principles were needed to safeguard liberty and project a rightly ordered conservatism against the dominant liberalism.

The ultimate principle of Meyer’s thought was the unique integrity of the human person, “a belief that is the first principle of any philosophy of freedom”.<sup>189</sup> The libertarian tradition ran deep in Meyer, he taught that “*all* value resides in the individual; *all* social institutions derive their value... and are justified only to the extent that they serve the needs of individuals”. Two political axioms emerge from these principles. First, due to man’s imperfection “the division of power (both within the political sphere and between the political sphere and other spheres) and unceasing vigilance to keep it divided are the essential safeguards of freedom”. And second, that the most essential division of power was of the state and the market; “the entire sphere of economic activity must remain free of political control”.<sup>190</sup> Meyer summoned both Montesquieu and Madison’s *Federalist* 47, underpinned with libertarian support, to serve as conservatism’s political basis.

Meyer did not, however, neglect tradition. He took seriously the notions of truth and transcendence while remaining convinced that freedom must be politics sole end.<sup>191</sup> His project was to reconcile freedom within the context of the Western Judeo-Christian tradition and this endeavour spilled into the pages of *National Review* in the early 1960s in a long-form debate between Meyer and Brent Bozell. Bozell contended that virtue was the final end of political society, a key traditionalist tenet. Meyer rejected this. In justifying his position he attempted to square the circle of conservatism’s inherent libertarian-traditionalist tension.

Meyer’s argument was three-fold. He acknowledged that freedom was not man’s ultimate end. “It is a condition, a decisive and integral condition, but still only a *condition* of that end,

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>188</sup> Meyer, “Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism (1960),” p. 20.

<sup>189</sup> Meyer, “Collectivism Rebaptized (1955),” p. 8.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Kevin J. Smant, *Principles and Heresies: Frank S. Meyer and the American Conservative Movement* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), p. 94.

which is virtue”.<sup>192</sup> A rightly ordered life would be lived in pursuit of virtue, in accordance with reason and tradition. Virtue, however, could not be coerced and instead must be chosen.<sup>193</sup> There is no virtue without freedom; a virtuous act without freedom is divested of virtue. If society was to foster virtue then it must create the conditions for virtue to flower, that is to say, political freedom. The coercive state robs its inhabitants of the opportunity for virtue. Meyer further insisted that virtue could exist only in individuals, not societies. States that fixated on the collective over the individual inevitably tended toward totalitarianism.<sup>194</sup> A conservative agenda, Meyer concluded, must be founded on realising political and economic freedom. “Virtue in freedom – this is the goal of our endeavour”.<sup>195</sup>

Although critical of traditionalists for their perceived comfort with authoritarianism, Meyer was in search of a consensus, not libertarian critique. He was also sceptical of the market’s ability to impart virtue. “Conservatism, therefore, unites the ‘traditionalist’ emphasis upon virtue and the ‘libertarian’ emphasis upon freedom. The denial of the claims of virtue leads not to conservatism, but to spiritual aridity and social anarchy; the denial of the claims of freedom leads not to conservatism, but to authoritarianism and theocracy”.<sup>196</sup> By holding the two tendencies in a precarious balance of “virtue within freedom” Meyer believed he had articulated the natural conservative consensus, a principled, positive conservatism for a post-revolutionary era. Meyer further held that his “marriage” of traditionalism and libertarianism was the only authentic American conservatism. Without an emphasis on freedom, critics were right to claim that conservatism was little more than European authoritarianism misapplied to the American condition.<sup>197</sup>

The marriage of liberty and virtue, however, was criticised from all sides. Weaver found it too harsh on community; Kirk, Meyer’s most trenchant critic, decried it as disconnected from justice and in celebration of the “freedom of the Congo”; Willmoore Kendall thought it doctrinaire.<sup>198</sup> Still, Meyer’s consensus found traction as the debates over first principles began to subside. “Fusionism”, a term widely used, although not by Meyer, became the de facto position of *National Review* conservatives. “Virtue within freedom” was a tent large

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<sup>192</sup> Meyer, “In Defense of Freedom (1962),” p. 127.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., pp. 128-48.

<sup>195</sup> Frank S. Meyer, *The Conservative Mainstream* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969), p. 50.

<sup>196</sup> Meyer, “Why Freedom (1962),” p. 162.

<sup>197</sup> Smant, *Principles and Heresies: Frank S. Meyer and the American Conservative Movement*, p. 108.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., pp. 105-6.

enough to accommodate most and the best compromise available. Coupled with support for Goldwater and opposition to communism, fusionism was the foundation of conservatism in the 1960s.<sup>199</sup>

The first of Meyer's remarks in a lively debate about Lincoln appeared in June 1965. The dispute began with a small paragraph, buried in the back of *National Review's* Arts & Manners section. Meyer briefly reviewed Dean Sprague's *Freedom Under Lincoln*, a narrative history, more popular than academic, that was critical of some of the Lincoln administration's actions during the war.<sup>200</sup> Sprague found fault with the system and Secretary of State William Seward more than with Lincoln: the president was "caught in an agony" hating the authoritarianism he knew necessary for the preservation of the Union.<sup>201</sup> Meyer's review was bitter. He agreed with the thrust of Sprague's argument, but criticised his failure to reach the final conclusion that Lincoln was a coldblooded authoritarian. Even so, Sprague was courageous for even daring "to pierce the myth of Abraham Lincoln's benevolence" and examine a period that was, "in terms of civil liberties, the most ruthless in American history". The historical record that Sprague outlined was clear: in light of "the naked use of federal power" against both the population and the press, Meyer suggested that a better title would have been *Repression Under Lincoln*.<sup>202</sup>

*National Review* published two letters in response. The first, from a "fellow conservative... and an admirer of Lincoln", "vigorously" protested the verdict. Any authoritarianism on Lincoln's part was out of sheer necessity. To doubt his benevolence was to ignore his letter to Mrs Bixby, his conciliatory Reconstruction programme, and the above-the-fray contemplativeness of the Second Inaugural Address.<sup>203</sup>

The second letter, published discretely in a block of letters and without fanfare, was by William F. Buckley. The articulate Buckley was the dynamic force behind *National Review* and an essential adhesive for the conservative movement. As the public face of conservatism Buckley provided a platform from which to advance conservative ideas and gave direction to the movement. Occasionally, he played a regulatory role over the movement's public

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 107-8.

<sup>200</sup> Frank S. Meyer, "Freedom under Lincoln," *National Review* vol. 17, no. 24 (1965), p. 520.

<sup>201</sup> Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Fate of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 117, 231.

<sup>202</sup> Meyer, "Freedom under Lincoln," p. 520.

<sup>203</sup> Lawrence Sork, Jr., "Letter to the Editor: Meyer on Lincoln," *National Review* vol. 17, no. 30 (1965), pp. 621-2.

standpoints. Buckley intended for conservatism to be palatable for the mainstream, a persuasion with appeal to intelligent opinion makers and without the aura of fringe crankery.<sup>204</sup> To this end, he was unafraid to wield his editorial power to keep the conservative movement from too close an association with marginal views. He had attempted to freeze anti-Semitism out of the right and shunned the *American Mercury*. He allowed Whittaker Chambers to savage Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Following the Lincoln debate, Buckley dedicated an issue of *NR* to the demolition of the John Birch Society whose anti-communist paranoia tarnished the conservative movement's attempts to engage with the mainstream.<sup>205</sup>

Buckley rebutted and gently admonished Meyer for his comments on Lincoln, signalling that conservatism was not about to reject a president widely considered among the greatest.

Some conservatives have a Thing on Lincoln, including, unfortunately, my esteemed colleague Mr. Frank Meyer. It is too bad to see the argument burst out of its ghetto ("Lincoln was a relativist," "He didn't understand the Constitution," "He was a poor statesman" – not untenable arguments) to incorporate the charge... that Lincoln was anti-humanitarian. It seems to me that this is worse than mere tendentious ideological revisionism. It comes close to blasphemy to say such a thing about a President whose recorded words preaching love and reconciliation, because of their sublime quality, could not have come except from a pure heart, words which do more even now to inspire lively sentiments of faith, hope and charity than the millions of words and deeds of the little florence nightingales [sic] in and out of the world of ideology.<sup>206</sup>

Buckley knew that some conservative intellectuals, including several within his close circle, held reservations about Lincoln. Concerned that the sentiment might burst forth in the public, Buckley tempered it with a pre-emptive defence. Avoiding historical and philosophical arguments, Buckley, impressed by the man and the power of his language as an inspiration to virtue, found most to praise in Lincoln's "recorded words". When Meyer pressed his argument, Buckley left the rebuttal to Lincoln scholars, but left no doubt as to where his sympathies lay.

The issue was not settled with Buckley's response. *Freedom Under Lincoln* had crystallised Meyer's thought and Buckley's step of public letter-writing did not foreclose debate. In an essay length articulation of his reasoning, Meyer outlined several of what would become the

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<sup>204</sup> Allitt, *The Conservatives*, pp. 177-8.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr, "Letter to the Editor," *National Review* vol. 17, no. 30 (1965), p. 621.

classic conservative reservations about Lincoln, arguments with sharp resonance in the contemporary political climate. Although Buckley occasionally engaged in doctrinal policing, he generally preferred to act as an umpire in the intra-conservative debates.<sup>207</sup> Typically he gave his editors latitude to pursue their own arguments within the conservative ambit. Even so, the editorial note outlining the contents of the issue was clear that “Frank Meyer sharply disagrees with Mr. Buckley on, of all people, Abraham Lincoln”.<sup>208</sup>

Meyer admitted that he was hesitant to put forward his views on Lincoln since they ran so against the pieties of his age, but he and the movement broadly were no strangers to being outside of the mainstream. Their self-conception as an embattled remnant allowed Meyer, Kendall, and others, to make unpopular stands, like the public defence of Joseph McCarthy. Kevin Mattson argues that the conservative movement of the 1960s, far from a collection of staid conformists, was a radical challenge to the (liberal) establishment.<sup>209</sup> Meyer’s iconoclastic defenestration of Lincoln was part and parcel of the conservative rebellion against mainstream society. Within *National Review*, Meyer and Buckley were unafraid to go beyond popular opinion but their impulse to shock was seasoned by James Burnham, the man with perhaps the most influence over Buckley. As a senior-editor, Burnham favoured a conciliatory approach toward the mainstream, anxious about veering into “right-wing provincialism”.<sup>210</sup> Any overtures to moderates struck Meyer as shallow and unprincipled and, despite his secluded lifestyle, his conflict with Burnham over *National Review*’s direction was intense.<sup>211</sup>

Setting aside his reservations, Meyer pressed ahead with his criticism of Lincoln.<sup>212</sup> “[I]t has been borne in upon me more and more that his pivotal role in our history was essentially negative to the genius and freedom of our country”.<sup>213</sup> Unlike Kirk, Meyer was not interested in Lincoln’s personal virtues or magnanimity. Nor was he assuaged by the “magnificent language and... personal acts of individual kindness” that Buckley cited. Questions of person and language could be put to one side; the issue was political and historic. Lincoln had a profound and negative impact on the American experiment in ordered liberty. If anything, Lincoln’s personal virtue brought his repressive political manoeuvres into sharper relief.

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<sup>207</sup> Alvin Felzenberg, *The Operator: The Political Legacy of William F. Buckley, Jr.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, Forthcoming), *forthcoming*.

<sup>208</sup> Editorial, “In This Issue,” *National Review* vol. 17, no. 34 (1965), p. 705

<sup>209</sup> Mattson, *Rebels All!*, pp. 22-61.

<sup>210</sup> Allitt, *The Conservatives*, p. 178.

<sup>211</sup> Wills, *Confessions of a Conservative*, p. 46.

<sup>212</sup> Frank S. Meyer, “Lincoln without Rhetoric,” *National Review* vol. 17, no. 38 (1965), p. 725.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

Judgement of him as a man was virtually impious but “men who live by politics in the forefront of history can and will be judged politically and historically”.<sup>214</sup>

As Meyer interpreted it, the Founding was an “exalted attempt, through the Constitution in its original form, to establish for the first time in human experience political mechanisms to guarantee the liberty of the individual person by limiting the power of government”.<sup>215</sup> It was an attempt to actualise the notion that all value was in the individual and therefore liberty must be guaranteed – the first principle of Meyer’s political thought. The constitutional order also realised Meyer’s essential political axioms. The separation of powers and the freedom of the economy were established through “what has usually been called ‘checks and balances,’ but it is more accurately designated as the setting up of a state of tension between all the political centers of power so that effective final power rests in none of them”.<sup>216</sup> By carefully dividing sovereignty among the people, the Constitution limited the dangerous accretion of power and prevented any one branch of government exerting dominance over the others.

Meyer had an idiosyncratic understanding of the forces at work in it. He argued that the essential division of power was “the tension between the several states and the national government”.<sup>217</sup> Before the Civil War it was unknown whether secession was lawful. It was conceivable that states might secede in response federal abuses of power and this extreme possibility was a final check on the government. The question of secession was at stake in 1860. Northern and Southern Partisans both forced the issue of state-federal relations but “[Lincoln] alone had the power to reaffirm the constitutional balance. Instead, under the spurious slogan of Union, he moved at every point (no matter that he would have preferred to achieve his ends without war; so would every ideologue) to consolidate central power and render nugatory the autonomy of the states”.<sup>218</sup> Lincoln, Meyer charged, forever skewed the constitutional order in favour of the federal government.

The issue of state authority against the federal government had special resonance at Meyer’s time of writing. His Lincoln essay was written in light of the Civil Rights Act and during the month the Voting Rights Act was signed into law. Meyer’s analysis of the question of secession was also directly influenced by the conservative movement’s infatuation with the South. The Southern States had long been solid Democratic votes, a part of the longstanding

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.



New Deal coalition. However, Southern electoral allegiance to the Democratic Party was beginning to falter just as many conservatives were finding much to admire, or at least sympathise with, in the South. The growing appreciation of the South's conservative nature was informed by the number of conservative voices that emerged from the region. Richard Weaver, the Southern Agrarians, and even Michigander Russell Kirk, advanced a narrative framing the South as the conservative soul of nation and alternative to liberal America. Mattson suggests that the conservative embrace of the South and, at times, a sympathetic view of the Confederacy was emblematic of the movement's rebellion against the mainstream; "[w]hat could be more rebellious than the Stars and Bars?" The Southern agrarian-republican tradition, from Jefferson through Calhoun and into the twentieth century, became essential for the conservative imagination in their search for a usable heritage.<sup>219</sup>

Moreover, many conservatives were uncomfortable at best with the course the civil rights movement had taken in both the North and South. Racial prejudice and opposition to radical change combined with a genuine concern for the constitutionality of the Warren Court's decisions and steps the federal government took. Desegregation bussing and the federalisation of the National Guard at Little Rock left many conservatives feeling that a second Civil War, or at least Second Reconstruction, was at hand.<sup>220</sup> Although the magazine later altered its tone, during the mid-to-late 1950s, *National Review's* editorial line was cautiously in favour of white supremacy in the South for the time being, on the basis of white cultural, not racial, superiority.<sup>221</sup>

Coinciding with conservative sympathy for Southern whites was an increasingly Southern political strategy. For a variety of factors the once solid South was in the process of an electoral transformation. Goldwater's "Southern strategy" had won Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana for the Republican Party for first time since Reconstruction, signalling a shift in earnest toward Republican electoral success in the South.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, pp. 306-18., Mattson, *Rebels All!*, p. 48-56, quote on p. 55.

<sup>220</sup> Mattson, *Rebels All!*, p. 50-5.

<sup>221</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr, "Why the South Must Prevail," *National Review* vol. 4(1957), p. 149.

<sup>222</sup> Gary Miller and Norman Schofield, "The Transformation of the Republican and Democratic Party Coalitions in the U.S.," *Perspectives on Politics* vol. 6, no. 3 (2008), p. 438.; for a discussion of the modern South's political transformation and the several intersecting factors at play in its shift towards the Republican Party see Wayne Flynt, "The Transformation of Southern Politics, 1954 to the Present," in *A Companion to the American South*, ed. John B. Boles (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 494-503.

Meyer had long been critical of attempts to resolve civil rights issues at the federal level. He firmly supported the “states’ rights” position, arguing in 1957 that the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* “rode roughshod over precedent and reason and constitutional obligation” by force of “positivist sociological assertion” and “Liberal cant”.<sup>223</sup> Meyer held that the tradition of states’ rights superseded the claims of the oppressed black population. No branch of the federal government had the authority to compel a resolution on the nation when “profound differences” existed between the people. To support the contemporary states’ rights cause, Meyer drew on John Calhoun’s nullification, concurrent majorities, and secessionist arguments.<sup>224</sup> To defend Southern segregationist policies, Meyer suggested the states employ nullification and interposition, and strengthen their militias.<sup>225</sup>

The parallels between the lead-up to the Civil War and the crises of the civil rights era meant that historical analogies were readily apparent and frequently made. To conservatives, the government coercion of established “folkways” echoed Lincoln’s Civil War power grabs. The tense question of states’ rights dovetailed with the growing tendency to associate Lincoln with liberal activism. Meyer’s belief that the state-federal tension was essential to the Constitution made his interpretation of Lincoln as an early proponent of federal rapacity an obvious conclusion. Lincoln became a symbol of federal supremacy – a precursor to Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson – and this perspective is ever-present in his portrayal.

One of Meyer’s biographers has argued that his reservations regarding the civil rights movement were indeed constitutionally and not racially based.<sup>226</sup> The status of the Constitution, states’ rights, and the American tradition were at the forefront in his mind. He hoped these considerations would “give pause to those thoughtful men, particularly in the North, whom compassion for a servile people and devotion to abstract justice” had caused them to lose sight of the dangers of federal overreach.<sup>227</sup> However, friend Garry Wills reflected that Meyer’s outlook grew darker in the late ‘60s, particularly after his diagnosis with cancer. He found that “[Meyer’s wife] could no longer argue and laugh him out of his antiblack outbursts”, suggesting that Meyer, like many in his era, held racial or cultural

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<sup>223</sup> Frank S. Meyer, “In the Great Tradition,” *National Review* vol. 3(1957), pp. 527-8.

<sup>224</sup> Smant, *Principles and Heresies: Frank S. Meyer and the American Conservative Movement*, pp. 42-3.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>227</sup> Frank S. Meyer, *National Review* vol. 3(1957), p. 528.

prejudices against the African-American population.<sup>228</sup> Even so, Meyer admired Booker T. Washington and argued that “the Negro people will gain respect and status primarily on the basis of their achievements of economic and social skills and disciplines – a truth that hundreds of thousands of solid Negro families are demonstrating in our time”.<sup>229</sup> Instead of federal action, he believed the best results for African-Americans would come through the diligent practice of conservative values and the enactment of conservative economic policies that would benefit all.

Beyond his impact on the federal-state balance, Meyer held Lincoln accountable for further wrongdoings. “It is on his shoulders that the responsibility for war must be placed”.<sup>230</sup> Had he not been ideologically motivated, Lincoln would have allowed the seven original secessionist states to leave the Union peaceably and thereby retain the loyalty of Virginia and the upper South. The natural congruity of interest between the states would naturally lead to reunion.<sup>231</sup> Instead, Lincoln’s stand on principle, Meyer alleged, doomed the nation to an avoidable war.

This contention conformed to the still dominant “revisionist” interpretation of the war. Emerging in the 1920s and 30s as an anti-war reaction to the First World War, revisionist scholars held that peace was the natural state of human affairs. War was entirely irrational and would never be chosen by rational actors. The Civil War was not the result of sectional differences but rather caused by an unnatural inflammation of the public’s emotions into an hysterical state. The war was needless: to the leading revisionist historians, Avery Craven and, especially Lincoln biographer James G. Randall, it was a result of minor sectional differences artificially stoked by demagogues in both the North and the South. “They were both fighting mythical devils”. The revisionists placed blame at the feet of “extremists” from both sections, but reserved special ire for abolitionists. They championed “moderate” figures like James Buchanan and Stephen Douglas. Randall argued that Lincoln had been a moderate. In the first two of his four-part biography of Lincoln Randall portrayed Lincoln as essentially a Douglas Democrat. In 1961, Randall’s *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, a key text of the revisionist school, was revised and republished to acclaim.<sup>232</sup> Unlike Randall, however, Meyer placed Lincoln squarely amongst the extremists.

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<sup>228</sup> Wills, *Confessions of a Conservative*, p. 48.

<sup>229</sup> Frank Meyer, *The Conservative Mainstream*, quoted in Allitt, *The Conservatives*, p 194.

<sup>230</sup> Meyer, “Lincoln without Rhetoric,” p. 725.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Thomas J. Pressly, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War*, First Collier Books ed. (New York, NY: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 300-327., Mark E. Neely, Jr., “Abraham Lincoln Vs. Jefferson Davis,” in *Writing the Civil*

Moreover, Meyer detected in Lincoln a calculated ruthlessness in his prosecution of the war. His aim was to eliminate the autonomy of the states and to this end he inculcated a “win at any cost” mentality. Total war – “war conducted to achieve victory neglecting every other moral end” – is inexcusable in a fratricidal conflict, yet, “this was Lincoln's pattern of war leadership: in the North, a repressive dictatorship; against the South, the brutal meat-grinder tactics of ‘Unconditional Surrender’ Grant and the brigand campaigns waged against civilians by Sherman; in war aims, no effort at reconciliation, only the complete triumph of central government”.<sup>233</sup> Lincoln’s words might inspire an elevation of spirit, Meyer conceded, but they only served to mask his monstrous deeds and aims.

Were it not for the catastrophic damage Lincoln inflicted upon the American system, the Roosevelt revolution might have never occurred. For the libertarian and anti-communist Meyer, the centralisation and expansion of the federal government in the New Deal was the great error of the American twentieth century and the genesis of the “coercive welfare state... against which we are fighting today”. He drew a direct line from Lincoln to Franklin Roosevelt. “Lincoln undermined the constitutional safeguards of freedom as he opened the way to centralized government with all its attendant political evils”.<sup>234</sup> Meyer understood the world in terms of history and tradition and with reference to its impact on the modern political situation. To him, Lincoln became an antecedent of Roosevelt, one that paved the way for his innovations. Opposing the New Deal had been a galvanising factor in the emergence of post-war conservatism. If Lincoln was a proto-Roosevelt, he must be rejected by true conservatives. The association of Lincoln with Roosevelt was not an unusual one: Roosevelt himself had employed Lincoln as a “useable history”, naming him, along with Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Woodrow Wilson, as fathers of the New Deal.<sup>235</sup> In a way, Meyer was rejecting Roosevelt’s Lincoln.

The theme of Lincoln as dictator was out of the mainstream but not without precedent. As *National Review*’s book review editor and as a prolific reader, Meyer was likely aware of literary critic Edmund Wilson’s unconventional analysis of Lincoln from his influential *Patriotic Gore*. Written at the height of the Cold War, *Patriotic Gore* featured a strong subtextual critique of American domestic and foreign policy. Its introduction was a study of

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*War: The Quest to Understand*, ed. James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper, Jr. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 103-4.

<sup>233</sup> Meyer, "Lincoln without Rhetoric," p. 725.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Donald, "Getting Right with Lincoln," p. 14.

power in US history. “Union”, wrote Wilson, was “simply the form the power drive took”. “If we would grasp the significance of the Civil War in relation to the history of our time, we should consider Abraham Lincoln in connection to the other leaders who have engaged in similar [unification] tasks. The chief of these leaders have been Bismarck and Lenin”. Lincoln, Bismarck and Lenin, “presided over the unifications of the three great new modern powers”.<sup>236</sup> “Each established a strong central government over hitherto loosely coordinated people. Lincoln kept the Union together by subordinating the South to the North”.<sup>237</sup> Wilson’s Lincoln was an “uncompromising” dictator that distorted the American system and was succeeded by agencies that continue to exercise this power”.<sup>238</sup> The United States’ strong central government and history of power-driven adventurism was the realisation of policies initiated by Lincoln. Wilson was no conservative – he rejected the movement’s aggressive anti-communism and Cold War “liberation” strategy – but his theme of Lincoln as dictator was a likely influence on Meyer’s thought.

In any case, Meyer’s essay provoked a considerable response from *National Review*’s readership and contributors.<sup>239</sup> The magazine published a representative cross-section of the correspondence, much critical but with a sizable minority that agreed with Meyer’s iconoclasm.<sup>240</sup>

Meyer responded directly in defence of his thesis. His critics, he argued, pursued two main avenues of criticism. The first alleged that Meyer was guilty of “unconservative” behaviour for “questioning American legend”. He responded that conservatives must, in the words of Richard Weaver, “distinguish... between traditions when they clash”.<sup>241</sup> When the clashing traditions in question were the constitutional order and the legacy of Lincoln, there was no contest: the constitutional order was the highest tradition of the United States: all else was ancillary.

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<sup>236</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. xvii - xviii.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> Frank S. Meyer, "Letter to the Editor: A Reply," *National Review* vol. 17, no. 40 (1965), p. 888.

<sup>240</sup> Various, "Letters to the Editor: Re Lincoln without Rhetoric," *National Review* vol. xvii, no. 40 (1965), pp. 858, 88. Henry Paolucci, a professor of classical politics and literature in New York and former New York Conservative Party senatorial candidate, wrote that he was “disturbed” that Meyer had given the impression that conservatives were not united behind the preservation of the Union. Another believed Lincoln’s turn towards total war was motivated by fear of electoral defeat to McClellan. Meyer was praised for his bravery in challenging the Lincoln myth.

<sup>241</sup> Meyer, "Letter to the Editor: A Reply," p. 888.

The second line of criticism argued that since the Constitution presupposed Union, in the event that the existence of the Union is threatened, defence of the nation overrides constitutionality.<sup>242</sup> Meyer pronounced the argument anathema.<sup>243</sup> “Lincoln ... can be ranged among the disciples of this concept which is the polar opposite of the American Constitutional tradition of tension, balance, and freedom”. This contradicted the essential libertarian component of American conservatism. If the concept of *nation above all* is conservative, it is only in “the sense of the nineteenth century European authoritarian tradition of Maistre and Hegel”.<sup>244</sup> A Lincoln that “enslaved free men” in the name of “the nation” was indeed a Bismarck with no place in the American tradition of liberty.

Publishing Meyer’s anti-Lincoln broadside is suggestive of Buckley’s ecumenical grace in balancing the competing views within conservatism. There was a certain editorial line at *National Review*, but the journal was a space for conservative intellectuals to thrash out conclusions; competing arguments were allowed and encouraged and Buckley tended to give his veteran writers room to expound on their own, sometimes controversial, views.<sup>245</sup> Meyer was not alone in his scepticism toward Lincoln. Kirk, Kendall, Wills, and Jeffrey Hart, influential writers or former writers for *National Review*, each broadly favoured the political tradition of Calhoun over Lincoln, if not Calhoun himself. However, “like Samuel Johnson taking care as a young parliamentary reporter that ‘the Whig dogs don’t have the best of it’”, Buckley tended to retain a right of reply for the side of the argument that he favoured.<sup>246</sup>

A debater, polemicist, and prominent exponent of the right, as a public intellectual Buckley was primarily a communicator. Intelligent as he was, Buckley was neither a political theorist nor historian. A friend and colleague suggested that he focused his energies on “high-level conservative journalism, acting as a broker and analyst of ideas rather than an originator of them”; “he ... left the metaphysics to others”.<sup>247</sup> Deferring to those more qualified on a given subject, when discussing Lincoln, Buckley drew on his friend Harry Jaffa.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> This argument was proffered by Henry Paolucci, a conservative ally known personally by Meyer.

<sup>244</sup> Meyer, "Letter to the Editor: A Reply," p. 888.

<sup>245</sup> Richard Brookhiser, *Right Place, Right Time: Coming of Age with William F. Buckley Jr. And the Conservative Movement* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009), p. 101.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>247</sup> "The Sniper," *Time*, 3/11 1967, p. 92.

<sup>248</sup> Brookhiser, *Right Place, Right Time*, p. 63., Wills, *Confessions of a Conservative*, pp. 5, 7.

For much of his long career Jaffa's main avenue of publication was *National Review*, the consequence of intellectual ostracism and burned bridges.<sup>249</sup> "It was only because of Bill that I was not swept under the rug".<sup>250</sup> Between the publication of Meyer's review of *Freedom Under Lincoln* and his critical essay, one of Jaffa's scholarly books, *Equality and Liberty*, with a positive portrayal of Lincoln, was reviewed favourably in *National Review*, albeit not by Meyer.<sup>251</sup> Jaffa's version of conservatism had opponents on the senior editorial board of *National Review*. "Buckley could not openly endorse my flat opposition to his editors", Jaffa recalled, "but he made sure what I had to say was published".<sup>252</sup> His manuscripts were, for a time, sent straight to Buckley's desk.<sup>253</sup> In this instance, Jaffa's pugilistic style was deployed against Meyer. As the magazine's introductory remarks winkingly put it, "Prof. Jaffa...obviously believes that moderation in pursuit of Meyer is no virtue".<sup>254</sup> Jaffa believed the magazine's readership was far more convinced by his advocacy of Lincoln than some of its editors were.

Typical of Jaffa, his response to Meyer's essay was both expansive and deep. "Bold" for rejecting received opinion, Jaffa claimed that Meyer's conclusions were, nevertheless, based on a faulty interpretation of history and "inferences from the present that give erroneous impressions of the past".<sup>255</sup> Damningly, there was silence on slavery, the true matter of Lincoln's thought on equality. De-contextualising Lincoln like this was nothing short of a "default" on Meyer's own deeply held and eloquently expressed conviction of the "absolute value of human freedom".<sup>256</sup>

On the juridical basis of secession, Jaffa rejected Meyer's arguments about the tension between the state and federal governments. He aligned himself, and attempted to align the conservative movement, with the venerable but not uncontested "Federalist" tradition that maintained a loose construction of the Constitution and a favourable disposition toward the scope of the federal government. Madison and Hamilton, Jaffa claimed, had argued that the Constitution was itself necessary because of the weakness of the Confederation in relation to the states. Washington himself had signed into law the First Bank of the United States,

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<sup>249</sup> Jaffa, "The Soul of Buckley," [www.nationalreview.com/blogs/print/224105](http://www.nationalreview.com/blogs/print/224105).

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Stanley Parry, "The Dilemmas of Equality," *National Review* vol. 17, no. 35 (1965), pp. 606-7.

<sup>252</sup> Jaffa, "The Soul of Buckley," [www.nationalreview.com/blogs/print/224105](http://www.nationalreview.com/blogs/print/224105).

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Editorial, "In This Issue," p. 793. An allusion to Jaffa's authorship of Goldwater's controversial "extremism in pursuit of virtue" speech.

<sup>255</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "Lincoln and the Cause of Freedom," *National Review* vol. 17, no. 38 (1965), pp. 827.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

legislation unconstitutional if the Constitution did not imply powers unstated in the actual document.<sup>257</sup> Rejecting the strict constructionism implicit in Meyer's position, Jaffa claimed that Lincoln and the conservative movement were heirs of "John Marshall's jurisprudence" and the "indivisible and indestructible unionism of Webster and... Andrew Jackson".<sup>258</sup> This conservatism echoes not only Lincoln's defence of Union, but the National Republicanism and Whiggery of Lincoln's model, Henry Clay.

The debate between Meyer and Jaffa had echoes of the Federalist-Republican division in the First Party System. There was a tension in the conservative movement that manifested itself in the clash between the state and federal governments. More broadly, the underlying division in the movement revolved around the tension between the Northern and the Southern cultures; between the mercantile and industrialist conservatism of Alexander Hamilton and the Jeffersonian vision of rural agrarianism.<sup>259</sup> Jaffa, the arch-Lincolnian and conservative New Dealer, staked out a Whig influenced Federalist position. In the 1970s and '80s, as the conservative movement became involved in national governance and gained new allies, particularly the New York-centric and Beltway based "neoconservatives", the classic Federalist-Republican debate came to the fore in a struggle over the direction of the movement. As early as 1965, signs of the coming debate were beginning to appear.

Jaffa challenged Meyer's claims about secession. Meyer had argued that until the war, secession served as a possible sanction against the excesses of the federal government. In response to the 1832 Nullification Crisis, Andrew Jackson declared secession incompatible with the existence of Union and received congressional support for a military response. "I believe", wrote Jaffa, "that Jackson's opinion on the supposed right of secession, based squarely on the major announcements of Hamilton, Madison, Washington, Marshall, and Webster, and many others in accord with the dominant tradition of American statesmanship, and an overwhelming majority of Americans, North and South".<sup>260</sup> Secession may have been the majority opinion in South Carolina, but it was not otherwise widely held: General Lee, for example, did not believe the Southern states were within their rights to leave the Union.<sup>261</sup> Jaffa ridiculed Meyer's contention that secession was essential to the honest operation of the

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Allitt, *The Conservatives*, pp. 6-27., Darren Staloff, *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson : The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2005), pp. 125-31, 358-61.

<sup>260</sup> Jaffa, "Lincoln and the Cause of Freedom," p. 827.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.



government: “I do not know of a single authority who ever held that the actual Constitution ever depended for its efficacy upon uncertainty as to whether a state could secede”.<sup>262</sup>

Equally absurd, he thought, was the suggestion that Lincoln ought to have relinquished federal authority over the original seven seceding states. Meyer’s was not a novel solution. A strategy of indulgence toward the secessionist states had been proposed, debated, and rejected during the actual crisis. Meyer’s solution was idealised and ahistorical. It ignored contemporary foreign policy considerations, potential grievances around the partition of the territories, the problem of fugitive slaves and resumption of the outlawed slave trade. Moreover, a precedent of secession opened the Union and Confederacy to further, potentially unrestrained, balkanisation. The proposal, plausible as it appeared at first blush, was bereft of “political realism”.<sup>263</sup> Like most of Meyer’s conclusions about Lincoln, it was bold, but speciously founded.

Jaffa also took issue with Meyer’s arguments on sovereignty and limited government on principle. The Founders had, contrary to Meyer’s suggestion that the Constitution “rested sovereignty nowhere”, clearly rested sovereignty in the people, a fact “found on nearly every great document of the period”.<sup>264</sup> The issue was in what formulation were the people sovereign: as one national body, or in states? In a rhetorical step, Jaffa conflated Frank Meyer with Calhoun. According to Jaffa, Calhoun was the major intellectual opponent of Lincoln, if not his literal political opponent. Meyer’s notion of “multiple tensions” reflected the Calhounian doctrine of concurrent majorities. Unstated in Meyer’s essay was Calhoun’s support for slavery as a positive good. Slavery, Jaffa argued, was the ultimate form of unlimited government. Identifying political theories developed in defence of slavery with limited government was, Jaffa thought, a cancerous strategy. As a champion of limited government Meyer should be dissuaded and disgusted by Calhoun, not endorsing his political doctrines.<sup>265</sup>

Lincoln understood, with supreme clarity, the connection between “free, popular, constitutional government, and the mighty proposition ‘that all men are created equal’”.<sup>266</sup> This, Jaffa proposed, was his genius. The crux of his defence of Lincoln was that constitutional construction was “absolutely subordinate” to the animating principle that gave

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p. 828.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 827.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p. 828.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

“life and meaning to the whole regime”.<sup>267</sup> In contrast to Meyer, who feared that a focus on collective virtue was the road to totalitarianism, Jaffa held that government must be motivated by virtue. In practice the animating virtue was the equality of the Declaration of Independence. Consent, required for the establishment of government, is contingent upon “the primordial tenet” of equality. Lincoln saw that slavery, by denying consent and equality to those it enslaved, was nothing less than a direct challenge to the Constitutional regime. A state that permits the existence of slavery cannot denounce arbitrary government with any legitimacy. Lincoln, rightly, in his “recognition that *all* men have rights which *no* government should infringe”, was unafraid to put justice and moral coherency above questions of political arrangement.<sup>268</sup>

Jaffa was still keen to defend Lincoln against charges of dogmatism. “Lincoln was no abolitionist; he was the least doctrinaire man that ever lived”.<sup>269</sup> He was not utopian in understanding the obstacles to slavery’s extinction. Instead, he led the way toward freedom and endeavoured to block the *extension* of slavery. Jaffa and Jaffa’s Lincoln were convinced that the expansion of slavery into the territories, made possible by popular sovereignty and the ruling in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, would result in the end of freedom. “The issue that led to his election was *not*, ‘Shall slavery be abolished?’ but ‘Shall slavery *or freedom* be abolished?’”.<sup>270</sup> However, respectful of the Constitution, there is no evidence Lincoln would have challenged slavery in the South. Were it not for the attempt by the Southern Confederacy to “reverse the results of the election of 1860”, Lincoln “neither could nor would have taken any of those steps that led to the violent demise of slavery”.<sup>271</sup>

In no way, Jaffa argued, did Lincoln intend the “destruction of the autonomy of the states” Meyer had alleged.<sup>272</sup> Lincoln advocated “gradual, compensated emancipation, by state, not federal action”.<sup>273</sup> The scheme allowed the states forty years for compliance and limited the federal government’s role to underwriting the costs to the states. Far from being an act of fire-breathing abolitionism, the Emancipation Proclamation represented an “obligation to the men in the ranks to neglect no means to end the war”.<sup>274</sup> The terrible choices that required resolutions at the height of America’s greatest crisis, wrote Jaffa, “are not what may appear to

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., p. 842.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

the leisurely commentator”.<sup>275</sup> As Lincoln himself had written, “I have not controlled events, events have controlled me”.<sup>276</sup> Such was the state of the conservative movement in the 1960s, with its Kirkian emphasis on continuity and Meyer and others’ veneration of the constitutional order, that Lincoln’s *lack* of abolitionist instincts and *moderation* in opposing slavery were emphasised to mollify critics and defend his legacy.

As a final point Jaffa returned to Lincoln’s defence of universal standards against relativism. Counter to the ascendant positivism of the 1960s, Jaffa argued that Lincoln stood against the notion that the Constitution “may mean whatever enough people (or the judges) think it should mean”.<sup>277</sup> Government must be directed by moral purpose; morality is not dictated by “this debased, plebiscitary version of supposed free government”.<sup>278</sup> Jaffa rejected Meyer’s contention that the government’s final end must be the establishment and defence of personal liberty. In Straussian thought the ultimate purpose of a *polis* was the cultivation of virtue. For Jaffa this meant that the American nation, as founded and rightly ordered by the Declaration of Independence, must, with due prudence, pursue virtue and justice. Such an imperative was vital for Lincoln as he led the nation against the subversion of America’s promise of equality. The Straussian argument was a densely reasoned and rhetorically powerful defence of virtue in the semi-settled debate over the true end of government. Out of step with the burgeoning fusionism, Harry Jaffa was for virtue with a roar.

Slavery robbed its victims of their labour and their life. The doctrine of slavery as a positive good, absent at the Founding but having developed in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, increased the moral horror of American slavery, culminating in the notorious *Dred Scott* decision that declared “blacks had no rights that whites were bound to respect”.<sup>279</sup> “I can think of no good objection”, Jaffa wrote, “to either Nazism or Communism, that would not apply to the chattel slavery that once existed in this country”.<sup>280</sup> If the Constitution is no longer the “instrument of liberty” it was before Lincoln’s presidency, this loss is mitigated by a “mighty entry: the destruction of that reproach to everything sacred to the American mission in the world”.<sup>281</sup> Lincoln’s historic political legacy is more than defensible, but he ought to be encountered on a higher plain. “As Woodrow Wilson said, the phenomenon of

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> On slavery as a positive good, James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 56-7. Also, *Scott v. Sandford*, 393(1856), paragraph 407.

<sup>280</sup> Jaffa, “Lincoln and the Cause of Freedom,” p. 842.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

Lincoln has made it possible to believe in democracy”.<sup>282</sup> Implicit was Jaffa’s concern that the conservative movement risked working against justice in the present political situation. Conservatives were standing against human equality in opposing the civil rights movement, a truth that could not be voted up or down. In doing so they risked ceding the moral high-ground to liberalism.<sup>283</sup>

Jaffa’s essay received a number of critical responses. Several were disappointed by his employment and apparent endorsement of Andrew Jackson. Another interpreted his argument as a modern iteration of the divine right of kings.<sup>284</sup> Meyer’s rejoinder came in early 1966 with the weary title “Again on Lincoln”. “Professor Jaffa”, he wrote “is entitled to his loose-constructionist position; he has distinguished company, men so different in other respects as Alexander Hamilton, John Marshall, Andrew Jackson, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson”.<sup>285</sup> None of the figures Meyer listed were widely well-regarded by the conservative movement, a kind of historical guilt by association. Roosevelt and Johnson, in particular, were considered statist notable for centralisation and federal overreach and Jaffa had also mentioned the unpopular Woodrow Wilson in his defence of Lincoln. The loose-constructionist interpretation does have its origins in Washington’s presidency, Meyer allowed, but he criticised Jaffa for concealing the equally august strict-construction school that also has its origins in 1791. James Madison, the drafter of the Constitution, had argued against the Bank of the United States on strict-constructionist grounds. Within Washington’s cabinet, Thomas Jefferson and Edmund Randolph both repeated Madison’s arguments; Jefferson advancing the argument for states’ rights explicitly.<sup>286</sup> Quite the opposite of Jaffa, Meyer “had rather supposed that until the days of Franklin Roosevelt the strict-constructionist theory predominated in the tradition – although battered from time to time by the power grabs of an Andrew Jackson or Abraham Lincoln”.<sup>287</sup> After misrepresenting the construction debate in history, Meyer alleged, Jaffa had sided with the statist position.

On secession, Meyer clarified his position. Division of sovereignty was the essential guarantee of division of power, he argued. Sovereignty implies the right to secession. The Constitution needed to balance the division of sovereignty while retaining a functioning federal union: the *Federalist* had made clear that past failed federal republics had been as

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Kesler, "Harry V. Jaffa: Giving Us Lincoln," p. 108.

<sup>284</sup> Various, "Letter to the Editor: Revisionism?," *National Review* vol. xvii, no. 42 (1965), pp. 900-1.

<sup>285</sup> Frank S. Meyer, "Again on Lincoln," *National Review* vol. 18, no. 4 (1966), p. 71.

<sup>286</sup> Staloff, *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson : The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding* pp. 116-20.

<sup>287</sup> Meyer, "Again on Lincoln," p. 71.

often the result of weak unions as over-mighty central authorities. The Constitution's silence on secession, Meyer reiterated, was a deliberate omission intended to preserve the tension between the federal government and the states. Lincoln, "in words and deeds, before and after his election," had provoked and intensified the challenge that culminated in the war that forever settled the secession debate and eliminated the states' essential check on the federal government.<sup>288</sup>

Jaffa's arguments defied Meyer's core belief that division of power is the practical requirement for liberty and that liberty is the correct object of politics. He embraced the broad-construction school of constitutional interpretation that had animated statist from Hamilton to LBJ. Further, he endorsed Lincoln's provocations that collapsed the tension between state and federal authority. Although Meyer and Jaffa were personally friendly, Meyer was scathing of his artlessness. "Jaffa's airy and cavalier lack of concern with how power is distributed leaves him with no defences, except hope, against the innate tendency of government to concentrate power and to ride roughshod over the individual. It fully explains his admiration of Jackson, Lincoln, et al".<sup>289</sup> Because he regards "the division of power as irrelevant to the 'principle of a free constitution'... Jaffa does not begin to grasp the incalculable damage for which Lincoln is responsible".<sup>290</sup> For Meyer, whose project centred on establishing practical principles to secure freedom, Jaffa's confidence in a virtuously ordered government was, at best, dangerously naïve.

As threatening as his naïveté was Jaffa's defence of Lincoln as a philosopher of equality. "The moral objections to slavery are manifold and I fully share Professor Jaffa's sorrow at its historical existence in the United States. But ... Jaffa, ignoring all the unexceptional grounds for the hatred of slavery, chooses to base his critique of American slavery on the proposition that the American polity is in its essence dedicated to equality – and to centre his vindication of Lincoln on Lincoln's role as the champion of equality. Nothing in my opinion could be further from the truth than this". That *freedom* was the essence of the American political heritage was semi-settled doctrine within conservatism. For Meyer certainly, "[t]he freedom of the individual person from government, not the equality of individual persons, is the central theme of our constitutional arrangements".<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

His break with communism was a culmination of a period of deep reflection on Marxism, brought about, in part, by exposure to Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*.<sup>292</sup> Like many former-communists, Meyer came to view communism and the Soviet Union from an apocalyptic standpoint. Firm in his libertarian convictions and cauterised by anti-communist fervour, Meyer believed liberty was fundamentally inconsistent with equality. "Nor is this merely a matter of two different emphases. Freedom and equality are opposites; the freer men are the freer they are to demonstrate their inequality, and any political or social attempt – like those so frequent in the twentieth century – to enforce equality leads inevitably to the restriction and the eventual destruction of freedom".<sup>293</sup> Kirk, Kendall, and many of their contemporaries were strongly opposed to the equalitarian principle; in Meyer this opposition was especially intense.

Libertarian apostle Murray Rothbard had criticised Meyer for allowing his "libertarian convictions [to be] fatally warped by his all-consuming desire to incarcerate and incinerate all Communists".<sup>294</sup> Meyer and Rothbard shared a similar view of equality, but Rothbard thought Meyer's virulent anti-communism typical of apostasy: "[the] total loss of perspective that leads the defector, in guilt at his former actions as well as resentment against his former colleagues for not seeing the light".<sup>295</sup> Jaffa was no communist but Meyer saw in his philosophical defence of Lincoln the same impulses he exposed and excoriated in communism. The Libertarian anti-communist Meyer was philosophically and psychologically predisposed to reject Lincoln's contention that America was dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal as a misguided and ruinous heresy.

Meyer did not deny the metaphysical or theological concept of equality before God, nor the equality of all before the law or government. Rather, the "equality which I regard as the opposite of freedom is the abstract, overarching, unmodified concept Professor Jaffa employs. The ideological drive to enforce such equality upon men, always unequally endowed, is the primrose path to tyranny".<sup>296</sup> Meyer's charge echoes Kendall's criticism of Jaffa's *Crisis of the House Divided*, "the cooperative commonwealth of men who will be so equal that no one will be able to tell them apart".<sup>297</sup> Jaffa clarified his use of equality in 1975

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<sup>292</sup> William C. Dennis, "Foreword" in Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom and Related Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1962), pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>293</sup> Meyer, "Again on Lincoln," p. 71.

<sup>294</sup> Murray N. Rothbard, "The Communist as Bogey-Man," *Left and Right* vol. iii, no. 2 (1967), p. 22.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>296</sup> Meyer, "Again on Lincoln," pp. 71, 85.

<sup>297</sup> Willmoore Kendall, *The Conservative Affirmation* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery, 1963), p. 262.

in response to Kendall's further criticism of Lincoln, arguing that equality, correctly understood, was a conservative value.<sup>298</sup> Nevertheless, Jaffa's arguments were interpreted by both Meyer and Kendall as unwitting endorsements of a quasi-communist philosophy.

On Lincoln, Meyer remained steadfast that he was a centraliser that paved the way for the New Deal. He violated the constitutional balance, irreparably damaging the separation of powers that allowed successive presidents, including the incumbent Lyndon Johnson, to enact policies that expanded federal authority over the states, impinging on their folkways and sovereignty. Meyer added the charge that Lincoln was an early and prominent equalitarian who altered the course of the American political tradition. Lincoln's advocate, Professor Jaffa, was promulgating a counterfeit conservatism that emphasised a troubling combination of the politics of virtue and equality. "Jaffa's Lincoln is the champion of equality", Meyer wrote in his strident, unrepentant conclusion. "The Lincoln of whom I wrote is the creator of concentrated power, the President who shattered the constitutional tension. They are one and the same man". In Meyer's political thought, the impulse toward equality always led to the restriction of freedom. Lincoln, dedicated as he was to principle that all men are created equal, threatened American freedom. Lincoln's centralising tendencies and assault on the sovereignty of the states deepened Meyer's conviction that equality was the enemy of liberty and that the constitutional order was the worse for his election.

At the heart of Meyer and Jaffa's disagreement were competing claims about the role of government and the nature of conservatism. Meyer had worked to establish a conservative mainstream and by the mid-1960s fusionism had, with some intellectual shoe-horning, achieved broad acceptance from the movement. Shifting away from Kirk, Bozell, and other traditionalist approaches, the conservative mainstream held that virtue was not the realm of the government: morality could not be legislated. The ultimate political aim must be liberty. It was out of this belief that Meyer's criticism of Lincoln was born and, although some agreed with his analysis, it was a stark interpretation of the fusionist position and American history. By contrast Jaffa's view was a part of what George Nash called "the Straussian dissent". Meyer had previously disagreed with another Straussian, Walter Berns, who had railed against liberalism in the Supreme Court.<sup>299</sup> Berns held the Straussian belief that protecting natural rights is insufficient for a state. They rejected the fusionist presumption toward liberty; instead, a good state must cultivate justice and produce virtuous citizens.

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<sup>298</sup> Jaffa, "Kendall & Carey: The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition ", pp. 490-1.

<sup>299</sup> Walter Berns, *Freedom, Virtue, and the First Amendment*, (1957).

Berns taught that “[l]aw is concerned with the virtue of citizens...” “Man is by nature not an individual with inalienable rights, but a political being, who can achieve his nature, his end, only in the *polis*, if at all”.<sup>300</sup> As the mainstream movement was settling on the libertarian-tinted view of government, the Straussian school, of which Jaffa was a leading figure, provided something of a “minority report”. Where Meyer prized liberty and this led him, in a somewhat tortured way, to criticise Lincoln, the Straussians, and especially Jaffa, placed an overwhelming emphasis on virtue. They believed that neither liberty nor tradition were sufficient to adjudicate the just “strands of tradition” or the “immoral uses of liberty”.<sup>301</sup> Knowledge of moral right and the reason behind it was needed. Theirs was a conservatism that allowed for prudent but activist government in pursuit of just ends and virtuous citizens. Lincoln became one of their great symbols. Meyer and Jaffa’s disagreement about, for example, strict versus broad construction of the Constitution, was indicative of their respective philosophies. Although they spoke as conservatives, they had radically different visions of the philosophical underpinnings of government; their politics was similar but as men of ideas they differed tremendously.

As is frequently the case with Lincoln, the debate was a proxy for the status of the Declaration of Independence in the American tradition. In the search for a viable conservative heritage, Meyer identified the Constitution as the key to the tradition. In the Constitution, he saw his axioms established in the language and prestige of the Founding Fathers. By securing liberty and natural rights, the Constitution was the legitimate foundation of American conservatism. Jaffa, by contrast had, at this point, a negative view of the Founders who, via Locke, were inescapably “modern”. The Constitution was a fine document, as far as it went, but it was the “highest American [expression of the regime] only if one interprets the high in light of the low”, the major failing of modern political science.<sup>302</sup> Meyer offered a conservatism founded upon natural rights. Jaffa alleged that “all the state of nature theorists, and historical schools, tried to understand decent civil society – the high – in light of the most indecent and powerful passions”.<sup>303</sup> The Constitution alone was devoid of its directing spirit. Since men are not angels, as Publius taught, the Framers had compromised over slavery. The Constitution was, therefore, not just low but also tarnished. The Constitution and, indeed, the entire American tradition were given full purpose by the transcendent truth of the Declaration

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<sup>300</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, p. 343.

<sup>301</sup> Kesler, "Harry V. Jaffa: Giving Us Lincoln," p. 108.

<sup>302</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "The Achievement of Leo Strauss," *National Review* vol. 25, no. 49 (1973), p. 1355.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1353.



of Independence. That all men are created equal is the justice that the American regime ought to actualise, the ancient wisdom that, through Lincoln, rescued America from being a purely modern regime.

Meyer reached the conclusion that Lincoln had gone far beyond the bounds of the Constitution and done irreparable violence to the American tradition. That society was less capable of thwarting the corrosive success of liberalism and the unrest of the 1960s was partly a result of Lincoln's terrible judgement. Jaffa's belief, however, that the genius of the American tradition was acknowledgement of man's equality, led him to lionise Lincoln. He represented America as interpreted in the Straussian manner: the low – its political framework and liberties – in light of the high – eternal truth and justice.<sup>304</sup> The tradition of Lincoln was *the* conservative tradition. Foregoing it risked a descent into the unalloyed modernism Lincoln had inoculated it against.

The debate had largely dealt with Lincoln's historic actions and the correct way, as conservatives, to interpret their impact. Part of the argument resulted from Meyer's willingness to engage in conservative iconoclasm. To some extent the reclusive thinker was steeped in the mind-set of the Nockian beleaguered remnant and his own intellectual history had prepared him to make strongly principled, or even ideological, stands that left him very much in a (right-thinking) minority. Ever-present in the dispute was the fact that, although conservatism had something of a working orthodoxy, there were significant dissenting factions: these included the hard-line traditionalists and the classically-minded Straussians. The debate revealed deep divisions between these camps over methods of interpreting history, assumptions about the state, and political thought itself. Ostensibly about Lincoln – and for many this was the most salient feature of the series – embedded in both thinkers' positions are very clear, and very contradictory, claims about the nature of conservatism.

Both Meyer and Jaffa wrote to convince other conservatives. The discussion occurred within *National Review* and remained an intra-conservative affair, staying within the boundaries of the conservative intellectual milieu while the movement continued to gain legitimacy and votes. After a period of varying anti-liberal voices, "[s]omething *called* conservatism was winning adherents, and in these circumstances it became increasingly difficult to chide it for supposedly not belonging to the main currents of American history".<sup>305</sup> The movement began

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, p. 393.

to espouse a clear, if disputed, conservative American tradition. The movement had a plurality of voices arguing the case for its future and a plurality of positions on Lincoln but, as much activism and theory, those voices all in turn voted the same way.

### *William F. Buckley: The Republican Lincoln*

Prefacing Meyer's final anti-Lincoln reply was the announcement that, barring "tumultuous demand", debate over Lincoln would be closed for the time being. As much as *National Review* was an avenue for developing conservative positions, the Lincoln debate was of only peripheral importance and had the potential to taint the movement as fringe or extremist. After Goldwater's presidential campaign had been tainted with accusations of extremism, the conservative figureheads were eager to avoid further intellectual provincialism. However, the debate had caused a stir within the movement and Buckley assessed both arguments and produced a not uncritical defence of the president's conservative legacy.

Buckley's judgement appeared in *The Unmaking of a Mayor*, the chronicle of his partially pedagogical 1965 New York mayoralty campaign. Buckley, in an effort to showcase conservative policies for New York City's perennial problems, entered the race on the Conservative Party ticket as a spoiler against Republican candidate John Lindsay. In Buckley's estimation, Lindsay was disdainful of the party. Lindsay, the congressman for the Upper East Side, had a liberal voting record and links to the Liberal Party of New York. During the 1964 election Lindsay had failed to support Buckley's friend and ally Barry Goldwater.<sup>306</sup> "Lindsay's Republican Party is a rump affair, captive in his and others' hands, no more representative of the body of Republican thought than the Democratic Party in Mississippi is representative of the Democratic Party nationally".<sup>307</sup> Lindsay and the Democratic candidate, Abe Beame, Buckley joked, were biologically distinct, but politically identical.<sup>308</sup>

As much as Buckley's mayoral challenge was a personal campaign against Lindsay, whose apparent vacuity Buckley detested, the future of the Republican Party was also at stake. The Conservative Party of New York was concerned with the ideological purity of the Republican

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<sup>306</sup> Timothy J. Sullivan, *New York State and the Rise of Modern Conservatism: Redrawing Party Lines* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2009), p. 57.

<sup>307</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr., "Statement by Wm. F. Buckley Jr., Announcing His Candidacy for Mayor of New York, June 24, 1965," *National Review* vol. 17, no. 28 (1965), p. 587.

<sup>308</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr., *The Unmaking of a Mayor* (New York, NY: Viking, 1966), p. 276.

Party. In the wake of the 1964 election, critics of conservatism within the party saw in Lindsay and other “Rockefeller Republicans” a way back to electoral success. However, despite his failure, Goldwater had given conservatism a degree of public respectability. Buckley sought to retrench the conservative position and ostracise moderates and liberals within the party.<sup>309</sup> Should Lindsay make a strong showing, however, the Lindsay-Rockefeller Republicans would enter the next presidential nomination convention with significant prestige. Buckley had no real intention of beating Lindsay, instead seeking to make Lindsay untenable within Republicanism and prevent his election. Lindsay’s staff agreed. They reported that Buckley’s aim was to “*eliminate from major elective office a moderate Republican who would, if elected, become a threat within the Republican Party, to the Goldwater extremists*”.<sup>310</sup>

For his part, Lindsay had an awkward relationship with his party and ran as an independent.<sup>311</sup> Lindsay presented himself as a “fusion” candidate choosing as running-mates members of the Liberal and Democratic parties.<sup>312</sup> In response Buckley positioned himself as a loyal Republican standing for the party’s integrity. “It is my judgement that John Lindsay will do as much harm to the Republican Party if he is elected and becomes powerful, as anyone who has threatened the Party’s role as defender of the tablets in recent history...If the Republican Party is transformed in his image, I shall give you the Republican Party and go elsewhere”.<sup>313</sup>

To counter this criticism, Lindsay framed himself as a Republican in the Lincolnian tradition. “[The Republican Party is] the party of Lincoln, of civil rights”.<sup>314</sup> “I am a Lincolnian, in that I believe when an individual or a locality can’t help itself, it is the function of the federal government to help it... live in dignity and to live decently as human beings. This is the ancient tradition... of Republican thought”.<sup>315</sup> Lindsay, Buckley observed, had as little trouble “name-dropping” Lincoln as a Democrat would in referring to Jefferson. It was “standard practice among politicians” and an act of “arbitrary” co-option.<sup>316</sup> In *The Unmaking of a Mayor* Buckley set about assessing Lincoln to both retroactively strip the

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<sup>309</sup> Sullivan, *New York State and the Rise of Modern Conservatism: Redrawing Party Lines*, p. 59.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., p. 61. Italics in original.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-1.

<sup>314</sup> Daniel E. Button, *Lindsay: A Man for Tomorrow* (New York, NY: Random House, 1965), p. 40, quoted in Buckley, *The Unmaking of a Mayor*, p. 77.

<sup>315</sup> Button, *Lindsay: A Man for Tomorrow*, p. 17, quoted in Buckley, *The Unmaking of a Mayor*, p. 77.

<sup>316</sup> Buckley, *The Unmaking of a Mayor*, pp. 77-8.

victorious candidate Lindsay of his Republican rhetorical shield and parse out the Lincoln debate within conservative intellectual circles.

Buckley's first argument was that the meaning of "Lincolnian Republican" in the mid-1960s was far from clear. The president was "an infinitely complicated man" and "learned debate still rages about the exact nature of his contributions to the formulation of American political philosophy".<sup>317</sup> To claim "Lincolnianism" was not a complete position – neither as a Republican nor a politician. The onus, Buckley argued, was on those who would claim Lincoln to articulate "just what it is that he means by this tradition, especially insofar as it is separable from the Democratic tradition".<sup>318</sup> Whether a "Lincoln Republican" differed from a typical member of the contemporary Democratic Party was the foremost question. If Lindsay's so-called Lincolnian Republicanism made him a Democrat in all but name, he was an "embarrassment" to the two-party system.

Certainly Lincoln was anti-slavery: a Lincolnian could not, therefore, be for slavery, yet slavery had no un-contentious analogue in 1960s America. Lindsay castigated Goldwater as anti-Lincoln, but, Buckley observed, "one of the nation's best Lincoln scholars and most ardent admirers of him, Professor Harry Jaffa... was a supporter of Barry Goldwater".<sup>319</sup> Conversely, Frank Meyer had decried Lincoln as the "champion of executive and statist arbitrariness", the antithesis of conservatism as it was presently understood. "If the modern politician's invocation of Lincoln is to be taken as other than opportunistic and saprophytic, the invoker *must* describe what it is about Lincoln that he understands to be the quintessential Lincoln".<sup>320</sup> Buckley held that Lindsay had failed to articulate what aspect of Lincoln's presidency, character, or legacy, he stood for. His Lincolnianism was "proprietary, historically snobbish, diffuse and sentimentalized". "[E]vasive" and "intellectually incoherent", Lindsay's evocations of Lincoln amounted to little more than a fig leaf for "extreme" liberalism.<sup>321</sup>

Following his critique of Lindsay's content-light historical claims, Buckley evaluated which elements of Lincoln's life and presidency might be applicable to the present political situation. This was Buckley's most complete assessment of the Lincoln question that was the catalyst of the Jaffa-Meyer debate. Buckley, in diplomatic fashion, was careful to

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-9.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

acknowledge both of his friends views as he reached his own conclusion, all the while persistently criticising Lindsay and his allies.

He rejected Lindsay's contention that Lincoln's Republican Party was the party of "civil rights". "[N]ot according to the modern understanding of civil rights – the Democratic Party clearly deserves that title".<sup>322</sup> Buckley knew from the Lincoln critics among his colleagues that the president was open to criticism for executive overreach and the contravention of civil liberties. Lincoln had suspended *habeas corpus* and it could be argued that the Emancipation Proclamation ignored due process. Buckley argued that Lincoln's consternation over the Emancipation Proclamation's constitutionality and the fact that he was swayed by military necessity, not abolitionism, was evidence that he was not a champion of individual rights against the majority.<sup>323</sup> However, Buckley reiterated Jaffa's point that Lincoln was "perhaps the most powerful advocate in history of human equality as the necessary basis of self-government". He reconciled this apparent contradiction by concluding that "Lincoln simply didn't have the time or the opportunity to concern himself with the existing, or the problematical, threat of big business, or, in any systematic way, with the federal bureaucracy, and its bearing on human rights".<sup>324</sup>

Lindsay implied that as a Republican and supporter of the Liberal Party he, like Lincoln with Southerner Andrew Johnson, was a "fusion candidate". Buckley, via Lincoln, was sceptical of this claim. "As to the matter of fusion", he quoted Lincoln, "I am for it, if it can be had on Republican grounds: and I am not for it on any other terms. A fusion on any other terms would be as foolish as unprincipled... I am against letting down the Republican standard one hairs-breadth".<sup>325</sup> He further cited the Cooper Union address in which Lincoln declared the Republican Party to be the party of conservatism against the radical Southern fire-eaters. Lindsay positioned himself as the candidate of compromise, but Lincoln, Buckley reminded him, poured scorn on "contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between right and wrong".<sup>326</sup>

If anything, Buckley argued, Lincoln ought to be an embarrassment to liberals. Against the federal poverty and welfare programmes of the Great Society, Buckley cited the "Ten Cannots", a set of propositions encouraging thrift and industry over welfarism, widely

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

misattributed to Lincoln, in this instance by Buckley.<sup>327</sup> Here Buckley made an early and poorly researched attempt to claim Lincoln for capitalism and freemarket solutions to poverty over state welfare, a strategy that would be picked up on by later conservatives. If, on a rhetorical level, Lincoln could not be used as a conservative symbol of stability, he could be neatly employed in the service of the conservative challenge of the Great Society. The use of a misattributed quotation suggests Buckley's more polemical approach to the debate.

More embarrassing for liberals were Lincoln's comments on race and "civil rights as they are currently understood".<sup>328</sup> Again, closely following Jaffa's interpretation, Buckley insisted that "as a defender of the metaphysical proposition that men are equal, Lincoln was the greatest postbiblical political philosopher". From a modern perspective, however, Lincoln's views were not merely segregationist, but outright racist. Lincoln had claimed "that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favour of having the superior position assigned to the white race".<sup>329</sup> If, Buckley wrote, the Republican Party would make Lincoln its moral guide to civil rights issues, it followed that Goldwater's personal support for desegregation but unwillingness to challenge the "folkways" of the South in contravention of states' rights was the most "Lincolnian" approach.<sup>330</sup>

It might be conceded that Lincoln's views would have changed with the shifting social mores, Buckley allowed, but this cannot be presumed. Neither Goldwater nor Lindsay would accept Lincoln's Charleston remarks on race but "if tradition means anything at all," then the tradition of Lincoln on the issue of segregation is far closer to Goldwater than it is to modern liberal positions. It is the Democratic tradition, not that of Lincoln or the Republican Party, to erode the venerable and ancient constitutional system.<sup>331</sup> As much as Buckley tended to defer to his colleagues, this conclusion ran against Jaffa's contention that truth could not be dictated by popular opinion, and Meyer and Kendall's criticism of Lincoln as the un-maker of constitutional order.

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<sup>327</sup> The "Ten Cannots", originally written by William Boetcker.

<sup>328</sup> Buckley, *The Unmaking of a Mayor*, p. 80.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid. This paragraph, from Lincoln's debate with Stephen Douglas at Charleston, Illinois, is among the most cited and analysed passages in all of Lincoln's writing. The extent to which Lincoln accepted the socially prevalent racial views of 1850's South Illinois has been heavily debated.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., pp. 80-1.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

Buckley did, however, affirm the traditionalist conclusion that “[a]t the profoundest level, Lincoln was a moralist”. Drawing on Jaffa’s view that Lincoln held that “for *transcendent reasons* logically explicable, men cannot be treated as *other* than equal”, as well as Richard Weaver’s argument from definition, Buckley concluded that as a philosopher and statesman, Lincoln was dedicated to moral realism. As Buckley understood it, Lincoln was a part of the tradition of natural law and opposed to the pervasive relativism “that modern liberalism absolutely depends upon”.<sup>332</sup> “Beyond this towering point” – the point traditionalists had staked their claim over Lincoln upon – “Lincoln is up for grabs and has been claimed as a patron by any number of ideological opponents”, including the Warren Court and contemporary liberals.<sup>333</sup> Buckley fully endorsed as both useful and accurate the traditionalist approach to the moralist Lincoln, but remained aware of the Lincoln image’s contested and malleable nature.

In short, Buckley cautioned that the rhetorical appropriation of Lincoln was, if not meaningless, problematic. “A contemporary liberal Republican of limited imagination would, if wholly honest, more likely be saying that he is a Republican *notwithstanding* many of the utterances and attitudes of Abraham Lincoln. A conservative Republican of wider imagination would defend the proposition that Lincoln was a great political philosopher, though inept, at times, in statesmanship and ill-advised in some of his utterances”.<sup>334</sup> As a politician Lincoln was bound to his historic context, not a substitute for a modern political platform. “[E]xercises in posthumous political reconciliation at the precinct level of political controversy are either playful, arbitrary, or vulgar”.<sup>335</sup> Lincoln could not be brought to bear on contemporary political discourse without further clarification. Lindsay, according to Buckley, had based his Republican status on the so-called Lincoln tradition that, barring further explanation from Lindsay, Buckley had, for his readers, undermined.

Despite his warnings, Buckley engaged in some appropriation of Lincoln of his own. Not only was Lincoln a part of his critique of Lindsay, the successors of Lincoln’s positive contributions were the conservative positions within the Republican Party. He affirmed Jaffa’s interpretation of Lincoln, but also accepted some of Meyer’s criticisms, although without endorsing his negative conclusion. Against Meyer’s gravest charges, Buckley found Lincoln not guilty. Instead he blamed the liberal tradition, a tradition in which Lincoln, he

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

determined, had no part. Liberalism, undergirded by the moral relativism Lincoln had opposed, had had a corrosive effect on America. Buckley's conclusion fell between Jaffa and Meyer, but erred toward Jaffa's positive assessment of the president. He did not accept fully the reverence of Lincoln that Jaffa proffered, but neither did he take seriously Meyer and Kendall's claims that he was the *fons et origo* of the liberalism he opposed in Lindsay. As editor of *National Review*, Buckley had allowed Meyer the space to put forward his criticism of Lincoln. In *The Unmaking of a Mayor* he rejected Meyer's conclusions but suggested that a degree of historically minded criticism of Lincoln's leadership was the best approach for conservative Republicans.

Buckley's Lincoln was a Republican luminary, one whose views were incongruent with the liberalism of Lindsay and those like him. Putting light between the Republican Party and Lindsay liberals was one of Buckley's primary aims and if the symbol of a liberal Lincoln was a prop to keep them within the party, Buckley sought to attack that symbol and its usage. Lincoln became another part of Buckley's anti-liberal, anti-Lindsay arsenal. While Lindsay won the mayoral election, the symbol of Lincoln was not enough to keep him in the Republican fold and he left for the Democratic Party in 1971.

1965 was the hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's assassination and Buckley understood that the president had powerful symbolic value. He was eager to reject claims of liberal legitimacy founded on appeals to Lincoln and to show that the rise of conservatism within the Republican Party was congruent with the Lincoln tradition. As Lincoln was becoming increasingly interpreted as a liberal or progressive icon, Buckley made a qualified counterclaim for conservatism.



## Further Conservative Challenges

### *Willmoore Kendall: The Derailer Lincoln*

As a thinker, Willmoore Kendall supplied academic credentials and intellectual brilliance to the nascent movement. An important guiding light, one of his contributions was another influential and critical interpretation of Lincoln's impact on American history. As with Frank Meyer, Kendall revered the American tradition. He came to view Lincoln not as a symbol of the tradition but as its chief heretic. Rank and file conservatives, like most Americans in the mid-twentieth century, had considerable respect for Lincoln.<sup>336</sup> Kendall is notable for his anti-Lincoln analysis that a number of intellectuals found convincing. The reasoning behind his high profile dissent was indicative of his alternative vision of conservatism, one that rejected fusionism for a conservative majoritarianism that gained favour after his death.

Growing up in small-town Oklahoma, Kendall (b. 1910) led a precocious academic life.<sup>337</sup> He entered university at age 12, graduating before turning twenty.<sup>338</sup> As a Rhodes Scholar, Kendall studied Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Oxford, regarding himself as "a man of the Left" and possibly a Trotskyist.<sup>339</sup> Completing his studies in 1935, he was a correspondent in Madrid, covering the build-up to the Spanish Civil War. In Spain, he aligned himself with Trotskyism in opposition to the "dictatorial, totalitarian, antidemocratic aspects" of Stalinist communism.<sup>340</sup> Opposition became an outright hostility toward communism, a central tenet of his later thought. George Nash argues that Kendall's experience with the violence and social collapse of Spain informed his belief in the necessity of a societal consensus or orthodoxy and in the dangers inherent to "an open society".<sup>341</sup>

<sup>336</sup> Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*, pp. 175-7.

<sup>337</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, p. 351.

<sup>338</sup> George W. Carey, "Willmoore Kendall: 1909-1967," *The Western Political Quarterly* vol. 20, no. 3 (1967), p. 799. George Carey and Jeffrey Hart, who both worked with Kendall, claim he graduated at age 16, although George Nash, a widely respected historian of the conservative movement, suggests he was 18.

<sup>339</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, p. 351.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.357-8.

Kendall's first major work, *John Locke and the Doctrine of Majority Rule* (1941), was highly acclaimed. He addressed the apparent contradiction of Locke's advocacy of both natural rights and majority rule. In contrast to conventional approaches, Kendall resolved the tension by arguing that Locke was a majority-rule democrat whose consensus-based majority, as opposed to crude majoritarianism, would never "withdraw a right which the individual ought to have" – a recurrent theme of Kendall's thought.<sup>342</sup> Based on this book, Kendall joined the Political Science faculty at Yale. He was a popular teacher and advisor but his argumentative disposition and unorthodox and increasingly conservative thought put him at odds with the university. Kendall left Yale acrimoniously after fourteen years.<sup>343</sup> He finished his academic career developing a doctoral programme at the University of Dallas, a private Catholic institution. At Yale, Kendall's students included William F. Buckley and L. Brent Bozell. Buckley brought Kendall into *National Review* at its inception to serve, with James Burnham, as a founding senior editor and lend gravity to the magazine's masthead.<sup>344</sup>

Dwight Macdonald characterised Kendall as "a wild Yale don of extreme, eccentric, and very abstract views who could get a conversation to the shouting stage faster than anyone in living memory".<sup>345</sup> Macdonald's portrait was uncharitable toward Kendall's thought, but captured his disputatious nature and readiness to defy convention. *National Review* editor Jeffrey Hart wrote that Kendall claimed "flatly that his goal was to be *the* theoretician of the American conservative movement", a desire that put him at odds personally with others at the journal. Although he alienated most of his former colleagues, Kendall was profoundly influential on many of them including Buckley, Bozell, and Hart, as well as Garry Wills.<sup>346</sup> His thought developed over his lifetime but his most mature and conservative work attempted to resolve the tension between majoritarianism and virtue, pitting him against the largely anti-majoritarian outlook of conservatism and the fusionist emphasis on negative liberty. Nevertheless, Hart, writing after Kendall's death, suggested that he "remains, beyond a possibility of challenge, the most important political theorist to have emerged in the twenty-odd years since the end of World War II".<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Willmoore Kendall, *John Locke and the Doctrine of Majority Rule*, Reprint ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1965), p.135, quoted in Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, p. 355.

<sup>343</sup> Hart, *The Making of the Conservative Mind*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>346</sup> Jeffrey Hart, "Willmoore Kendall: The Unassimilable Man," *National Review* vol. 37, no. 25 (1985), p. 86.

<sup>347</sup> Jeffrey Hart, "Willmoore Kendall: American," in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, ed. Nellie D. Kendall (Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1971), p.26, quoted in George H. Nash, "The Place of Willmoore Kendall in

Kendall's primary criticism of Lincoln was that he had "derailed" the authentic American political tradition. The posthumously published *Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* (1970) was the clearest enunciation of Kendall's antipathy. Employing Eric Voegelin's methodology of symbols – myths or images that provide self-understanding to a society – Kendall traced the American political tradition from the Mayflower onward. Specifically, he charted the derailment of the true symbols of America and the distortion of the nation's political tradition. Kendall's main contention was that the "supreme symbol" of America was "self-government by a virtuous people" through legislative supremacy.<sup>348</sup> The basic symbols of the American tradition were, therefore, "representative assembly *deliberating* under God; the virtuous people, virtuous because deeply religious and thus committed to the *process* of searching for the transcendent Truth".<sup>349</sup> At some point in the nation's history, Kendall suggested, the rival symbols of equality and absolute rights gained currency, beginning the "derailment" of the authentic tradition; the distorted version is the conceptual framework of liberalism. Kendall did not name Lincoln as the source of derailment but rather that he was essential in legitimising the ersatz symbols.

Kendall believed that the Gettysburg Address was revered because it appeared to be an eloquent and succinct summation of the American tradition. In reality, however, its appeal is based on the modern acceptance of the distorted tradition. The Address's elegance is insidious, obscuring the "Lincolnian heresies" embedded within.<sup>350</sup> By emphasising equality, Lincoln undermined the authentic American symbols in favour of a rights-based tradition.

Despite his rightward shift there was a consistency to Kendall's thought. Motifs of societal orthodoxy, the "virtuous people", and majoritarianism recur, although the latter concept underwent refinement. Early in his tenure at Yale, Kendall described himself as an "old-fashioned majority-rule democrat"; even as a conservative he remained a registered Democrat until his death.<sup>351</sup> He opposed the "open society" and was critical, on majoritarian grounds, of

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American Conservatism," in *Willmoore Kendall: Maverick of American Conservatives*, ed. John A. Murley and John E. Alvis (Lanham, MY: Lexington Books, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>348</sup> Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey, *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), p. 138. The first half of the book is based on a series of lectures Kendall gave in 1964, the second half, partly assembled and partly written by Kendall's friend George W Carey, was a distillation of Kendall's thought on America from its earliest point. Although it is not authored solely by Kendall, the work is considered to be authoritative on Kendall's views and reflects his ideas as they appeared in his prodigious correspondence with others intellectuals.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88-9.

<sup>351</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American since 1945*, pp. 355-6., Wills, *Confessions of a Conservative*, p. 25.

the absolute right to free speech. Any society unable to arrest growing social divisions, he argued, would descend into the progressive breakdown of its common premises and resort to violence for the arbitration of public questions.<sup>352</sup> Kendall's conservative vision was dedicated to the maintenance of social cohesion and the politics of due political process, rejecting political claims based on absolute rights.

The basis of this philosophy was legislative supremacy. The supreme governing body of the United States, Kendall claimed, as established by the Constitution, is Congress. Congress is the practical manifestation of "We the People". Kendall's conservative contemporaries were critical of majoritarianism since simple majoritarianism allows majorities to ride roughshod over minorities and threaten societal consensus. To overcome these objections and reconcile majoritarianism with his own belief in transcendent truth, Kendall relied on the symbols of the "virtuous people" and the "Constitutional morality" of *The Federalist Papers*.

The "virtuous people" was not a claim about human nature, but a metaphor for the aggregate ability of the American people to choose right; an instinctual goodness "in their hips".

The American people, unlike perhaps other people, have a sense of right and wrong; they do have, in other words, a feeling for justice and doing that which promotes the true interests of the community. Off at the end, if given sufficient opportunity (which involves time to deliberate and meditate), the vast majority of the American people will opt for that which is just and designed to promote the permanent and aggregate interests of the community; they will, to turn the proposition around, reject the appeals of factions. And with this we have come back to the supreme symbols of the American tradition, that is, to the symbols of a virtuous people through deliberative process striving to achieve and advance their declared purposes which involve, *inter alia*, better ordering with justice.<sup>353</sup>

Nash suggests that Kendall's faith in the virtuous people was derived, in part, from his youth in small town Oklahoma; Kendall himself claimed to be an "Appalachians-to-the-Rockies American", cognizant of the supposed moral superiority of heartland America. Lincoln was a just this sort of man: disdainful of pretension and, at times, derided as a rail-splitter and prairie politician. Kendall, however, never emphasised this aspect of the Lincoln image.

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<sup>352</sup> Willmoore Kendall, "The "Open Society" and Its Fallacies," *The American Political Science Review* vol. 54, no. 4 (1960), p. 978.

<sup>353</sup> Kendall and Carey, *The Basic Symbols*, pp. 112-3.

Instead he fixed on the president as a symbol of equalitarian liberalism, not American virtue.<sup>354</sup>

The deliberative process Kendall celebrated occurred in the legislative branch of government as ordered by the Constitution. Specifically, Kendall meant the Constitution as interpreted by the *Federalist*. He argued that it was Publius who taught that the federal government is formed of three *equal* branches where the Constitution alone established a clear legislative supremacy. Out of fidelity to the *Federalist*, Congress restrains from exercising its “supreme weapons” to force its agenda through over the executive and judicial branches.

The constitutional order of the *Federalist* was crafted to encourage deliberation with the maintenance of social consensus its underlying intention. The “Constitutional morality” established a system with in-built delays in the decision making process – staggered elections, the Presidential veto, judicial oversight, and the presence of various intra-party factions. “Delay is requisite for, or, in other words, allows for, the emergence of a consensus among the people concerning proposals and programs in the political arena – a consensus that is, in important particulars, different from just simple majority rule which characterises direct democracy”.<sup>355</sup> Deliberative, “Madisonian majoritarianism”, maintains cohesion. That the majority must effectively convince the minority is just since all are equal in their capacity to give consent, a principle Kendall traced to the Mayflower Compact of 1620.<sup>356</sup> In practice “Congress *must* and *should*, week after week, month after month, and even, in some cases, year after year, keep on deliberating until, to all intents and purposes, all agree”.<sup>357</sup> Through the deliberative process, the “virtuous people” would ultimately choose right.

Since its establishment, the traditional federalist system had been seriously challenged and Kendall blamed Lincoln for the assault on the American consensus. A divisive leader, Lincoln was elected in a plurality – meaning he lacked the legitimacy of consensus – and under his leadership the United States was torn asunder. In reviewing Jaffa’s *Crisis of the House Divided* in 1959, Kendall insinuated that Lincoln bore responsibility for the escalation of the Civil War for his failure to compromise and refusal to explore alternatives to war. He

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<sup>354</sup> Catherine Clinton, "Abraham Lincoln: The Family That Made Him and the Family He Made," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*, ed. Eric Foner (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co., 2008), p. 49.

<sup>355</sup> Kendall and Carey, *The Basic Symbols*, pp. 110-1.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148. Madisonian majoritarianism is a term Nash uses usefully encapsulating Kendall’s basic political programme.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*

suggested that “Southerners were entitled to secede if the issue was to be drawn on Lincoln’s terms”.<sup>358</sup>

In *The Basic Symbols*, Lincoln is the major actor in the derailment of the authentic tradition, doing violence to the traditional symbol while promoting a new one. Subsequently, the Lincoln image has been used to advance that rival tradition. To illustrate the Lincolnian heresies, Kendall made a close dialectical reading of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln’s most damaging influence on the tradition. The first distortion is in the famous opening, “four-score and seven years ago” wherein the nation was “conceived in liberty”. By setting 1776 as the date of national conception, Lincoln was asserting that the Declaration of Independence was the founding moment of the United States. In effect he endowed the Declaration with constitutional status, which allowed him to then claim that the nation was “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”. Lincoln’s so-called “supreme commitment” to equality is in actuality an illegitimate symbol, incompatible with, and threatening to, the authentic tradition.<sup>359</sup>

From this derailment, succeeding generations have seized on the illegitimate symbol of “equality” and, shifting its definition, sought to establish it as the supreme symbol of political life. There are now two competing traditions: the Lincoln tradition – which “holds to a rather extreme view of equality” – and “an older one, which holds that our supreme symbol is to rule the deliberate sense of the community”.<sup>360</sup> The incompatibility of these traditions, Kendall argued, was the root cause of America’s “schizophrenic” relationship with its tradition. Lincoln’s inauguration, or, at least, legitimization, of a rival symbol and his adherence to a political philosophy of absolute rights was the basis of Kendall’s frustration with him.

Kendall rejected all politics based on equality and absolute rights. To that end *The Basic Symbols* was a sustained effort to minimise the importance of the Declaration in American history. To explain why equality remained a prominent, if not the dominant, symbol in political discourse despite its illegitimacy, Kendall blamed Lincoln for, effectively, deceiving the nation. He argued that the Declaration does not fulfil the role in the American tradition that Lincoln ascribed it. Historically, the Declaration established the independence of thirteen *independent* sovereign states, not the United States as a nation. Moreover, within America’s

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<sup>358</sup> Kendall, *The Conservative Affirmation*, p. 252.

<sup>359</sup> Kendall and Carey, *The Basic Symbols*, pp. 75-95.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

political tradition, the Declaration could not be the point of foundation. The ratification of the Constitution has a much stronger claim to foundational status, as do earlier points in the tradition. “For whatever reason...Lincoln is guilty of committing a very serious error, for he fixes our beginning as a people, any way you look at it, either at a point after our beginning or before it”.<sup>361</sup> The Constitution, composed and ratified in a significantly more deliberative manner than the Declaration, has far greater legitimacy. Those that signed the Declaration did so simply to establish independence from Britain. Its function was to state the reasons for separating from Britain. Without deliberative consent, there is nothing binding in the Declaration of Independence’s rhetorical exhortations.<sup>362</sup>

Even if Lincoln was correct about the constitutional status of the Declaration, Kendall maintained, it was still a distortion to claim that it demanded a supreme commitment to equality. “[Lincoln] is still not entitled off of the text of the document to wrench from it a single proposition and make that our supreme commitment”.<sup>363</sup> The text itself supports four different and partly contradictory propositions – equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In the context of the complete document and its function, Kendall concluded that the Declaration of Independence should be understood as an injunction to future governments to “(1) honour and secure the inalienable rights of man; and hence (2) derive their powers from the consent of the governed”.<sup>364</sup>

To fix upon the Declaration and to extract from it our basic commitment in the manner that Lincoln has done cannot help but create a distorted picture of our tradition. This alone is a very serious matter. But what is more, we are now in the process of seeing how it is that a tradition is derailed. Those who seize upon and stress the ‘all men are created equal’ clause, quite in keeping with the Lincolnian view of the tradition, have slowly, and understandably enough, fixed upon the symbol of equality as supreme.

For Kendall, the Constitution superseded the Declaration in every way. The Constitution’s preamble, he noted, outlining the aims of government, makes no mention of Lincoln’s so-called overriding commitment to equality.<sup>365</sup>

Kendall argued that the constitutional morality remained intact until the Civil War.<sup>366</sup> Although Lincoln helped ordain the tradition of absolute rights, he was not its progenitor.

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid. p. 89.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-5.

Instead, Kendall suggested vaguely that the seeds of derailment were planted somewhere in the intervening years between the Founding and Civil War. The existing “seeds” allowed Lincoln to “speak in the manner he did at Gettysburg and get away with it”.<sup>367</sup> In time, Lincoln became the most visible and authoritative proponent of the new symbol.

Placing equality (or any absolute right) at the centre of political society was deleterious to the continued functioning of the constitutional order. The Lincolnian tradition overlooked the *Federalist* morality. Instead, a “new morality” has flourished, rejecting patience, deliberation, and consensus. Kendall feared that impatience with deliberation would lead society to lose faith in Congress and empower the executive and judiciary to seek the fulfilment of rights over and above existing consensus.<sup>368</sup> As Kendall understood it, the politics of absolute rights was an existential threat to the constitutional order, a push toward the open society and the potential breakdown of civil society.

The attack on Lincoln reflects Kendall’s thought at the height of the civil rights era.<sup>369</sup> Before the New Deal, Lincoln’s image had been employed in defence of segregationist policies but, during the 1950s and ‘60s, Lincoln became associated with the goals and successes of civil rights.<sup>370</sup> Expanding on the Depression-era theme of Lincoln as “helper of all men”, parallels between the abolition slavery and the African-American struggle for civil rights were frequently drawn. Martin Luther King, Jr. called for “a second Emancipation Proclamation”, defining the Emancipation Proclamation as a document with civil rights at its heart. Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law in the room that Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation to underscore Lincolnian parallels.<sup>371</sup>

By association and selective historical interpretation, Lincoln became popularly perceived as “racial integration’s prophet” and a precursor to the progressive and egalitarian movements.<sup>372</sup> The notion of Lincoln as a proto-civil rights crusader, a reading largely at odds with the then current revisionist and psycho-historical historiography, became so entrenched in the popular imagination that the anti-slavery aspects of his presidency became

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., p. 143-4.

<sup>369</sup> Although *The Basic Symbols* was published in 1970 this was a posthumous publication. Its thought reflects aspects of Kendall’s mid-1960’s work on the civil rights movement

<sup>370</sup> Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*, pp. 91-114, 115-45.

<sup>371</sup> Barry Schwartz, “Collective Memory and History: How Abraham Lincoln Became a Symbol of Racial Equality,” *The Sociological Quarterly* vol. 38, no. 3 (1997), p. 487. Although King had reservations about Lincoln’s true role in the abolition of slavery, he was keen to use Lincoln to advance the cause of civil rights.

<sup>372</sup> Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*, p. 126.



the dominant aspect of his legacy.<sup>373</sup> This new aspect of the Lincoln image was the Lincoln that Kendall reacted against.

Kendall was not opposed to the civil rights movement in principle, nor the political gains they sought. He nevertheless harboured concerns about the movement's nature.<sup>374</sup> Kendall suggested that the struggle for African-American civil rights was a unique phenomenon in American history, predicting it would precipitate a constitutional crisis. The constitutional system was capable of absorbing drastic changes to its political make up, as the Prohibitionists and Suffragists had shown. The civil rights movement, however, was fundamentally different. Its revolutionary demands and conviction that change would be the fulfilment of longstanding promises gave the movement an unprecedented reluctance to accept failure or compromise.

The problem was society's capacity to accept integration in the short term. Due to its unique nature, Kendall worried that the civil rights movement might be incapable of waiting in the "political anteroom"; that is, of following the constitutional morality and waiting for consensus to shift in favour of integration. He feared that the recalcitrance of the South and the impatience of the movement could only be resolved by judicial fiat or bare majoritarianism, or both, in tandem with the executive coercion required to enforce rights. The result would be an abuse of the system that would damage, irreparably, the already threatened constitutional order.<sup>375</sup>

Nash suggests that Kendall's fear of social breakdown was the result of his experiences during the Spanish Civil War. It became essential for him that society maintain a consensus based political and social orthodoxy: "that tissue of judgments, defining the good life and indicating the meaning of human existence...who see in it...the ultimate justification of their society".<sup>376</sup> Kendall believed that a mythopoeic foundation was necessary for the functioning and preservation a society and was concerned that the United States might lose its shared basis. He did not predict a second Civil War, but rather that the executive and judiciary would enforce the movement's demands without securing consensus, thereby profoundly changing the nature of American government.

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<sup>373</sup> Schwartz, "Collective Memory and History: How Abraham Lincoln Became a Symbol of Racial Equality," pp. 129-34.

<sup>374</sup> Willmoore Kendall, "The Civil Rights Movement and the Coming Constitutional Crisis," *The Intercollegiate Review* vol. 1, no. 2 (1965), p. 53.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53-66.

<sup>376</sup> Frederick D. Wilhelmsen and Willmoore Kendall, "Cicero and the Politics of the Public Orthodoxy," *Intercollegiate Review* vol. 5(1968-9), p. 84.

Kendall's condemnation of Lincoln was along the same lines as his criticism of the civil rights movement's use of natural rights and equality. The argument in his *The Civil Rights Movement and the Coming Constitutional Crisis* – the danger that impatient actors, seeking to institute rights-based policies present to the constitutional order – is prominent in *The Basic Symbols* as evidence of the Lincolnian derailment.

The heroes of the new morality, ascendant amongst intellectuals, were “the Warrens, Blacks, Douglasses, along with the Wilsons, Roosevelts I and II, and the Lincolns”.<sup>377</sup> The constitutional morality has been replaced by an “apostolic succession of great leaders...each of whom sees more deeply than the preceding leader into the specifically American problem, which is posed by the ‘all men are created equal’ clause of the Declaration of Independence”.<sup>378</sup> It is a utopian dream built upon the hubristic notion of America as the New Jerusalem. The consequence of Lincoln's heretical vision, enshrined in the Gettysburg Address, is the derailment of the majoritarian constitutional order and the attendant constitutional crisis. “The false myths produce the fanatics amongst us”, wrote Kendall, and the Lincolnian symbol of equality as an absolute right is a false myth.

Interestingly, Kendall came to believe that the impending constitutional crisis of the civil rights era was avoided through traditional consensus politics. The movement “softened” and opened itself to the deliberative process. The resulting transformations were achieved through the legislature, the constitutionally correct branch of government and Kendall became one of the few conservative intellectuals to celebrate the civil rights legislation as “great conservative victories”.<sup>379</sup>

Kendall set the tone for a detectable undercurrent of reservation about Lincoln within conservatism. Many conservatives, although the proportion should not be exaggerated, were convinced by Kendall and Meyer's scepticism toward Lincoln. Garry Wills, the conservative wunderkind who later broke with the movement, described the rhetoric of the Gettysburg Address as “seductive” in his book on the Declaration of Independence. He later imported parts of Kendall's argument in his post-conservative Pulitzer-winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. Wills' analysis of the Gettysburg Address suggested that Kendall was essentially correct about Lincoln. The speech was “one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever

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<sup>377</sup> Kendall and Carey, *The Basic Symbols*, p. 144.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>379</sup> Willmoore Kendall, “What Killed the Civil Rights Movement?,” in *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum*, ed. Nellie D. Kendall (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1971), pp. 463-8.

witnessed by the unsuspecting”.<sup>380</sup> Other conservative thinkers, especially those closer to the paleoconservative perspective, employed elements of Kendall’s anti-Lincoln argument to bolster their own views.

Kendall’s stand against the first Republican president is one of his enduring contributions to conservatism. A second was the impact he had on Harry Jaffa’s thought and, indirectly, in giving birth to the so-called West Coast Straussians, an explicitly conservative branch of the Straussian school.

Kendall first challenged Jaffa in his review of *Crisis of the House Divided*.<sup>381</sup> Jaffa joked that it was “the most generous review ever written about a book with which the reviewer so thoroughly disagreed”.<sup>382</sup> Kendall praised *Crisis*’s rigour, commending it to a wide readership, but cautioned readers to “keep a sharp lookout” for the limitations of Jaffa’s argument. Jaffa later suggested that Kendall’s criticism was intended to put distance between himself and Jaffa so as not to tarnish the younger academic with his own reputation.<sup>383</sup> Nevertheless, there was genuine disagreement between the two. Written in 1959, the review was an inchoate formulation the critique Kendall’s later expanded in *The Basic Symbols*. Criticism aside, the friendship between Jaffa and Kendall, and need for conservative solidarity in its early stages, prevented Kendall’s total rejection of Jaffa’s thesis.

Kendall recognised that Jaffa’s chief concern was the status of the Declaration of Independence’s equality clause in the political tradition of America. Kendall suggested, and Jaffa agreed, that the question was the same as the question of Lincoln’s status *vis-à-vis* the Founding Fathers, which was the same again as the very possibility of democracy as a realistic form of government.<sup>384</sup> Jaffa’s solution – that the equality clause is the essential idea of the American tradition and that Lincoln perfected the Founders’ work by returning to the Declaration of Independence, transcending it, and building a political religion around the new Declaration – is argued against at length in *The Basic Symbols*. Kendall uncovered a

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<sup>380</sup> Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1992), p. 38. Wills did say, however, that Kendall and later Bradford were “suicidally frank” about their opposition to Lincoln.

<sup>381</sup> Originally printed in *National Review*, it was republished in Kendall, *The Conservative Affirmation*, and subsequently reappeared in *NR* in 1995.

<sup>382</sup> Jaffa, “Kendall & Carey: The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition”, p. 479.

<sup>383</sup> Jaffa, Phone Conversation, 2013.

<sup>384</sup> Kendall, *The Conservative Affirmation*, p. 250. Jaffa’s assent to this assessment is found in Jaffa, “Kendall & Carey: The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition”, p. 479.

contradiction in Jaffa's Lincoln. As Catherine and Michael Zuckert indicate, Jaffa's argument entailed Lincoln transforming the Declaration of Independence to impart the modern American regime with transcendent virtue. This amounted to a strategy of "Jaffa's Lincoln apparently endors[ing] the founders and their work but in fact overcome[ing] and transcend[ing] them".<sup>385</sup> Jaffa implied the need to "follow the imperfect founders as a solution to the imperfection of the founders" – a summary Jaffa later admitted was "a caricature... not without merit".<sup>386</sup>

Jaffa and Kendall presented surprisingly similar arguments concerning Lincoln's apparent transformation of the American tradition; their vastly different philosophies, however, led them to utterly disagree on the nature of the Lincolnian divergence. Where Jaffa celebrated this transformation as a laudatory achievement with Lincoln as saviour of the American regime, Kendall rejected Jaffa's Straussian framework, seeing the transformation as an illegitimate and altogether dangerous distortion of the original tradition. Moreover, Kendall found Jaffa's solution to the problem of self-government disturbing, specifically his anti-Caesar counter to the "Caesarist potential" of the constitutional system. Jaffa argued that Lincoln believed that the constitutional system would bring forth an anti-Caesar leader to form a political religion for society to live by. Jaffa supposed Lincoln to be this statesman; Kendall thought the prospect "hair-raising". To Kendall, Jaffa's heroic Lincoln was an attack on the deliberating people.

Although linked by their emphasis on virtue, Kendall and Jaffa's political philosophies differed strikingly. Kendall's commitment to societal consensus was in contrast to Jaffa's stress reference to justice that surpasses immediate political and historic contexts. The disagreement was more a question of modes than ends. Jaffa thought great statesmen were necessary to direct regimes toward virtue; Kendall believed that, given the right process, the people would choose virtue themselves. Empowering a leader over the deliberating people would have disastrous results, claimed Kendall. He envisioned a grim future:

an endless series of Abraham Lincoln's, each persuaded that he is superior in wisdom and virtue to the Fathers, each prepared to insist that those who oppose this or that new application of the equality standard are denying the possibility of self-government, each ultimately willing to plunge America into Civil War rather than concede his point – and off at the end, of course,

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<sup>385</sup> Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, p. 240.

<sup>386</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the Strauss Divided: Essays on Leo Strauss and Straussianism, East and West* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), p. 27.

the cooperative commonwealth of men who will be so equal that no one will be able to tell them apart.<sup>387</sup>

Both Kendall's allegiance to the legislative process and his anti-communism are clear in this prediction. Like his conservative contemporaries, Kendall was manifestly anti-utopian and Jaffa's – at the time liberal – philosophy had utopian overtones. The anti-Caesar Lincoln conjured, for these intellectuals who owe a significant debt to the Burkean critique of the French Revolution, the spectre of an American Robespierre.

The inevitable result of Lincoln's presidency and the unwitting endpoint of Jaffa's political thought, Kendall claimed, was a roadmap for aggressive progressivism. "The Caesarism we all need to fear is the contemporary Liberal movement, dedicated like Lincoln to the egalitarian reforms sanctioned by mandates emanating from national majorities – a movement which is Lincoln's legitimate offspring".<sup>388</sup> The very concept of "virtuous leaders" able to force "transcendent truths" on a nation was alarmingly close to liberal impatience with the fundamentally conservative legislative process. This impatience leads them to favour judicial activism and imperial presidencies. Even after Jaffa's rightward turn in 1961, his Lincoln inspired thought remained a rights based political philosophy, as threatening to Kendall's deliberative process as modern liberalism. In other words, Jaffa's Lincoln, far from being conservative, was a symbol of progressivism. His "open-ended warrant for transcending the [F]ounding" suggested an unfolding liberalism that verged on outright historicism, the *bête noire* of Straussian thought.<sup>389</sup>

Jaffa struggled with this powerful critique and responded in 1975 with a long review of *The Basic Symbols*. Jaffa's essay, "Equality as a Conservative Principle", is a characteristically full-throated refutation of Kendall's thesis and criticism of Lincoln.<sup>390</sup> In defence of Lincoln, Jaffa made the controversial argument that equality, correctly understood, did not lead inexorably to socialism but was a requirement for conservatism. A contentious and radical move, it highlighted the distance between Jaffa's thought and the movement in the 1960s. It

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<sup>387</sup> Kendall, *The Conservative Affirmation*, p. 252.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, p. 241. The Zuckerts rightly suggest that this progressivism was problematic within conservatism, but fail to note that Jaffa was *not* a conservative when he wrote *Crisis*. That said, Jaffa retained this position on Lincoln after his political shift, from which point his thought on Lincoln developed as outlined in the main text.

<sup>390</sup> Jaffa, "Kendall & Carey: The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition ", p. 471.

also represented a shift in his thinking about America, the Founders, Lincoln, and equality away from the traditional Straussian position he had held in *Crisis*.<sup>391</sup>

Jaffa first attacked Kendall's historical analysis. Kendall had argued that the Civil War was necessary only insofar as Jaffa's absolute terms are accepted; Lincoln had ignored viable alternatives and prosecuted the war unnecessarily.<sup>392</sup> Jaffa responded that one of Kendall's suggested alternatives, compensated emancipation, was, an anachronistic policy analogous to purchasing "Soviet state industries and returning them to free capitalistic enterprise" as a strategy for pursuing *détente* with the Soviet Union.<sup>393</sup> Rather than "drawn on Lincoln's terms", secession had been assured by the South. By rejecting Stephen Douglas, the viable Democratic candidate, over demands for an aggressive federal slave code, and then rejecting the duly elected president over slavery in the territories, Southern radicals established the terms of secession for themselves.<sup>394</sup> Jaffa wondered "whether Kendall was simply ignorant of the history of the period, or only pretended to be so".<sup>395</sup> After a lengthy examination of the crisis, Jaffa concluded that war was indeed inevitable and while Lincoln understood this, Kendall did not.<sup>396</sup>

Jaffa's philosophic defence claimed that equality was not only a conservative principle, but foundational to the United States. In this argument, the atypical aspects of Jaffa's particular conservatism emerged and a major plank of West Coast Straussianism took shape. Jaffa had no issue with Kendall's emphasis on deliberation and the virtue of the people, but argued that Kendall assumed the existence of the people. According to Jaffa, "a people become a people only by virtue of the principle of equality". In other words, a society only exists through equality.<sup>397</sup>

Jaffa contended that the ambition of Kendall's final years was to read Locke out of the American political tradition; a project that explains his distaste for the Declaration of Independence.<sup>398</sup> In doing so he treated consent as an end principle, failing to recognise that it was actually contingent upon man's natural freedom and equality. Using Lincoln to articulate the principle, Jaffa quoted the president at Peoria: "Judge Douglas... paraphrases

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<sup>391</sup> Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, p. 243.

<sup>392</sup> Kendall, *The Conservative Affirmation*, p. 253.

<sup>393</sup> Jaffa, "Kendall & Carey: The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition ", p. 482.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 487.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 489.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 494.

our argument by saying: ‘The white people of Nebraska are good enough to govern themselves, *but they are not good enough to govern a few miserable negroes!!*’ Well, I doubt not that the people of Nebraska are, and will continue to be as good as the average of people elsewhere. I do not say the contrary. What I do say is, that no man is good enough to govern another man, *without that other’s consent*’.<sup>399</sup> If men were not free and equal, Jaffa concluded, no consent would be necessary to govern them.

The common freedom and equality of mankind is not only the basis of consent, it is also the source of political obligation, the doctrine of limited government, and an ethical code.<sup>400</sup> Following Locke, Jaffa’s central premise held that man is neither a god nor a beast and therefore, no one man may claim authority over another, as a god may over a man or a man over a beast. To say that men are created equal is to acknowledge a truth about man’s status in the universe. It does not deny the very real differences between people, but rather “for the sake of those differences”, denies the right of anyone to govern another as if they were gods or the others beasts.<sup>401</sup> Understood thus, (limited) equality is the necessary foundation for civil society that, in turn, is the justification for the unequal outcomes of civil society.<sup>402</sup>

Presenting the contentious notion of equality in this manner was a departure for Jaffa. In *Crisis*, he had held that the Declaration of Independence and its reference to equality was established on a very different reading of Locke. He had originally interpreted the Founders’ use of equality as a negative right, drawn from the state of nature and moved beyond as civil society emerged. This interpretation stemmed from Strauss’s controversial view, subscribed to by Jaffa, that Locke was a crypto-Hobbesian. The Founders, by accident or design, had imported the modern concept of natural rights into the founding and, therefore, into the American regime. As a result of Strauss’s overwhelmingly negative view of modern regimes, Jaffa was admittedly “scathing” toward the Founders. “Gradually... [Jaffa] came to doubt the authority [he] had ascribed [to this interpretation]”.<sup>403</sup> In his response to Kendall, several years after Strauss’s death, Jaffa employed a revised interpretation of Locke that understood equality as a natural and self-evident truth based on distinct ontological categories. In Jaffa’s hands Locke’s thought became a contemporary reformulation of Aristotle’s and, as an

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid., p. 497.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., p. 498.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., p. 499.

<sup>403</sup> Jaffa, *Crisis of the Strauss Divided: Essays on Leo Strauss and Straussianism, East and West*, p. 29.

Aristotelian rather than Hobbesian, Locke became a thinker in the ancient mould.<sup>404</sup> The “ancient” Locke, Jaffa suggested, was the true influence of the Founders. Jefferson and the other Founders had, contrary to his original belief, embedded ancient thought into the American regime; it was, inherently, a good one.

This new conclusion changed the meaning of the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln’s role in the American tradition. When Lincoln said that Jefferson had placed in the Declaration “an abstract truth, applicable to all times and places” and spoken of America’s “ancient faith”, he was neither wrong, nor preaching a noble lie to redeem America. He was accurately re-articulating the Founders’ belief. The equality of the Declaration was founded on ancient, natural law by the Founders themselves. The upshot of Jaffa’s revised argument is that Lincoln was no longer a benevolent transformer. Rather than instilling the Declaration with ancient philosophy, he restored adherence to its original ancient content. Redeemer more than saviour, Lincoln was a philosopher-statesman who saw the true nature of the Declaration from the outset. To counter Kendall’s critique, Jaffa retreated from suggesting that Lincoln modified or, to use Kendall’s term, derailed the American tradition. In his new conception, Lincoln had *restored* the nation’s fidelity to the correct tradition. Neither at Gettysburg, nor anywhere else, had Lincoln changed or derailed the true tradition of the Founders.<sup>405</sup>

Kendall claimed Lincoln had held “curious notions” about equality and had succeeded in establishing them in the American tradition. Jaffa rejected this, without irony, as an unsubstantiated assertion that failed to engage with Lincoln’s thought beyond an idiosyncratic reading of the Gettysburg Address. While he was correct about Kendall’s limited evidence, he ignored the fact that his own view of Lincoln had, until recently, presented the president as a similarly transformative figure.<sup>406</sup> Jaffa also responded that Kendall distorted the meaning of Lincoln’s statements about equality.<sup>407</sup> In *The Basic Symbols*, Lincoln is condemned as a symbol of absolute equality but Jaffa was adamant that Lincoln endorsed only what would come to be understood as equality of *rights* and equality of *opportunity*. Lincoln, like modern conservatives, *rejected* the political impulse for equality of condition:

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<sup>404</sup> Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, p. 243-4. Jaffa, *Crisis of the Strauss Divided: Essays on Leo Strauss and Straussianism, East and West*, p. 29.

<sup>405</sup> Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, pp. 240-6. I am indebted to the Zuckerts’ superb analysis of the Jaffa and Kendall debate for tracing the profound impact Kendall’s critique had on Jaffa’s intellectual trajectory.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid. p. 243.

<sup>407</sup> Jaffa, “Kendall & Carey: The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition”, pp. 478, 491.



Certainly the negro is not our equal in colour – perhaps not in many other respects; still, in the right to put into his mouth the bread that his own hands have earned, he is the equal of every other man... In pointing out that more has been given [to] you, you cannot be justified in taking away the little which has been given [to] him. All I ask for the negro is that if you do not like him, let him alone. If God gave him little... that little let him enjoy.<sup>408</sup>

To Lincoln, equality meant “nothing more than the equal right of all men to be treated justly”.<sup>409</sup> If Lincoln was a symbol, Jaffa argued, he was a symbol of the thoroughly American concepts of self-reliance and self-advancement. Kendall’s Lincoln was an egalitarian; a charge Jaffa claimed was tantamount to slander.

From his Lockean standpoint of limited equality, Jaffa demanded a less apocalyptic reading of equality from Kendall, one not axiomatically equated with socialism. Jaffa argued that conservatives needed to realise that equality is necessary for private property. Following Locke’s *Second Treatise*, it is a person’s natural and equal right to their own body and labour that forms the basis of private property. When Madison supposed that the first role of government was protecting man’s unequal capacities of property acquisition, he was appealing to the Lockean understanding of equality, labour, and property.<sup>410</sup> Civil society and the conservative principles of property rights, personal freedoms, and ethical codes are each predicated on human equality. Lincoln understood its centrality when he said equality was “the father of all moral principle”.<sup>411</sup> It must be remembered, then, Jaffa argued, that when Lincoln spoke about equality, he meant it only in the limited sense. His use of equality shared nothing with the grossly expanded definitions used by communists or contemporary progressives. It is a myth “that Lincoln was somehow the spiritual father of the New Deal, of the expanded presidency of the twentieth century, and of the welfare state”. Lincoln, “almost wholly occupied with the prosecution of the war”, had only a limited role in the “domestic legislation” of his administration. “The Republican Party over which he presided sponsored a great deal of legislation” – largely traditional Whig measures. Lincoln signed them into law as a “matter of course” and they laid the foundation for the “ebullient capitalism” of the following decades.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid., p. 490-1.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., p. 491.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid. Jaffa alludes to Madison in *Federalist 10*.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., p. 491.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., p. 483.

Jaffa also noted that Kendall, like Meyer, was critical of Lincoln on equality without reference to slavery.<sup>413</sup> Totalitarian in nature, Jaffa argued that chattel slavery was both anti-reason and anti-Christian. Kendall's failure to contextualise Lincoln's comments undermined his criticism, presenting a misleading version of the president.<sup>414</sup> Downplaying slavery or eliding it altogether was a common trend among conservative critics of Lincoln. However, the abolitionist aspects of Lincoln presidency only really became the prime focus of his legacy during the 1960s. Kendall and Meyer's failure to emphasise slavery was congruent with Lincoln's traditional popular image. Before the mid-1960s, textbooks stressed Lincoln and the Union rather than Lincoln and slavery.<sup>415</sup> Kendall and Meyer addressed Lincoln on grounds that many would have found accurate and appropriate; Jaffa's interpretation of Lincoln is closer to the sort of emphasis that would come to dominate the Lincoln image. His is part of a newer, albeit for him conservative, approach to Lincoln, one broadly informed by the civil rights era.

The increasingly frequent invocation of Lincoln as a symbol of racial and social equality compounded Kendall's frustration with Lincoln as a derailer of the tradition. Kendall was, in part, blaming Lincoln for his use in modern politics and reading contemporary ideologies onto the president. There is a sense in which the progressives did trace their heritage back to Lincoln. His speeches and writings were increasingly interpreted in the light of egalitarianism and invoked in support of their causes. On these grounds Kendall was somewhat justified in claiming that Lincoln was a symbol of equality. The symbolic Lincoln was a legitimate target of conservative criticism. Kendall, however, went further and took aim at the historic Lincoln.

Indirectly, Jaffa sought to wrench Lincoln from the left. Already critical of the association of Lincoln with welfarism, the egalitarian Lincoln, he claimed, was a progressive fantasy: Lincoln's equalitarianism was a "just and generous conservatism".<sup>416</sup> In a bold statement, Jaffa claimed that the new conservatism was identical with the "Old Liberalism" and opposed to the radical progressivism masquerading as "New Liberalism". "The Old Liberalism saw life as a race, in which justice demanded for everyone only a fair or equal chance in the competition. But the New Liberalism sees the race itself as wrong. [Old Liberalism]

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid., p. 479. Kendall briefly discusses slavery, as noted above, in his review of *Crisis of the House Divided*, but neglects it in his fuller work *The Basic Symbols*.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., p. 492. Anti-reason because it acted as if men were gods or beasts.

<sup>415</sup> Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*, pp. 129, 131.

<sup>416</sup> Jaffa, "Kendall & Carey: The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition ", p. 501.

demanded the removal of artificial or merely conventional inequalities. But it recognized and demanded the fullest scope for natural inequalities...the New Liberalism denies natural no less than conventional inequalities".<sup>417</sup> This articulation of conservatism, founded on equality and self-consciously "liberal", was a source of much conservative teeth-gnashing. In ways similar to Frank Meyer's argument, Jaffa was convinced that conservatism required ordering beyond mere prescription. It also needed to do more than simply secure liberty. Jaffa instead sought to shape a conservatism guided by Straussian natural right. Lincoln was the beau ideal for this endeavour.

Kendall's Madisonian majoritarianism and Jaffa's conservatism of natural right were both concerned with engaging with the morally transcendent within a framework of prudent political philosophy. Neither thinkers' philosophy was representative of the mainstream of conservative political thought in the movement's nascence, yet both would prove influential doctrines. As conservatism began to transition in the late 1960s and early '70s from an anti-majoritarian outlook to a philosophy of the "silent majority", Kendall's Madisonian majoritarianism underwrote the strategic shift intellectually. Likewise, in an effort to provide alternatives to the entrenched relativism and big government programmes, conservative thinkers moved away from prescription and simple limitations on the government. Dissenting viewpoints in the 1960s, both Kendall and Jaffa's political thought became increasingly important to the conservative movement in the 1970s and '80s. In terms of their differing interpretations of Lincoln, the Jaffaite position continued to gain currency within the *National Review* crowd as Buckley was increasingly convinced by his morally rigorous conservatism. Traditionally outsiders to the nation's highest office, the Reagan revolution complicated conservatives' view of the executive office. Sometimes the executive might advance moral, conservative purposes – perhaps a little like freeing the slaves. However, this new vision was not universal. The older view of limited government had life left in it, as did the conservative anti-Lincolnian tradition.

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., p. 473.

## The (Southern) Traditionalist Backlash

### *M. E. Bradford: The Yankee Gnostic Lincoln*

Kendall's premature death prevented a Kendallian response to Jaffa's arguments. One of his appointments in his doctoral programme, however, the English Professor Melvin Bradford (b. 1934), advanced a virulent recapitulation of anti-Lincoln argument, drawing on Meyer, Kendall, and his own, deeply Southern, conservatism. Born in Texas, Bradford studied English at the University of Oklahoma before taking his PhD from Vanderbilt under Donald Davidson, "the only completely faithful Agrarian".<sup>418</sup>

When Bradford emerged as a rhetorician and Southern intellect in the late 1960s, he was identified as successor to Richard Weaver. However, respectful of Weaver as a "rigorous and principled conservative", Bradford distinguished himself sharply from the North Carolinian. Weaver, he suggested, was "a man of systems, an admirer of Plato and a devotee of the argument from definition – but not as a representative of any Southern conservatism we can recognise".<sup>419</sup> As a thinker who emphasised archetypes and ideals, Weaver was more characteristic of New England than the South.<sup>420</sup> Instead, Bradford took his mentor Davidson as a model. Davidson believed that Southern writers needed to live actively to the public square and Bradford accepted this vocation as his own.<sup>421</sup> Of all Bradford's wide-ranging and public activities, his assault on Abraham Lincoln's life and legacy was by far the most prominent and enduring.

A partisan of the South, Bradford was loyal to the faith of his fathers. In politics, Bradford stood for regionalism, agrarianism, organic social order, and the Protestant religion. A Dixiecrat by heritage, Bradford worked for George Wallace's 1972 presidential campaign. In 1975 he took the difficult step of joining the party of Lincoln in support of Ronald Reagan.<sup>422</sup> By the time of his death in 1993, Bradford was the preeminent thinker of paleoconservatism – a term only beginning to gain currency. During his lifetime he preferred to be known as a

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<sup>418</sup> Lewis P. Simpson, "The Story of M. E. Bradford," *The Southern Literary Journal* vol. 26, no. 2 (1994), p. 102.

<sup>419</sup> M. E. Bradford, "Where We Were Born and Raised," in *The Reactionary Imperative* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Co, 1990), p. 116.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> Simpson, "The Story of M. E. Bradford," p. 103.

<sup>422</sup> Fred Arthur Bailey, "M. E. Bradford, the Reagan Right, and the Resurgence of Confederate Nationalism," in *Painting Dixie Red*, ed. Glenn Feldman (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011), p. 297. Bradford had supported George Wallace in 1972, and worked for the campaign in Texas and led a Wallaceite delegation at the party convention. He enjoyed relaying "orders from Montgomery", an allusion to the first capital of the Confederacy.

“traditionalist conservative” or even reactionary – “[m]erely to conserve”, he noted, “is sometimes to perpetuate what is outrageous”.<sup>423</sup>

Bradford’s examination of Lincoln began with a rhetorician’s focus on his speeches and writings. From there he developed a comprehensive challenge to Lincoln’s status in American history. Shifting between rhetorical, political, and historical analysis in a series of essays and speeches, Bradford called into question Lincoln’s political and economic intentions, his views on race, and his wartime conduct. Most troubling for Bradford was Lincoln’s misinterpretation of the American past and frightening vision for a new American future.<sup>424</sup> Anti-Lincolnianism was a minority position within conservatism and Bradford’s was the most wide-ranging and complete conservative challenge to the president in the 1970s and ‘80s. It did not, however, fall on entirely deaf ears. Bradford advanced his case in a series of essays and speeches published, largely in conservative journals like *Modern Age* and *The American Spectator*.<sup>425</sup>

Bradford claimed that Lincoln’s soaring language was cynically manipulative and intended to advance a profoundly ideological agenda. He treated Lincoln’s “speeches and other writings, in all of their opportunistic variety, not as expressions of a political philosophy, but as exercises in management and manipulation, an artful music played to life and lower the passions and, in behalf of a ‘policy’ never fully stated (in fact, altered as he went along), to persuade”.<sup>426</sup> Among presidents, Lincoln was unmatched in the art of persuasion. His success, however, came through the employment of dark rhetorical strategies: “the trope of affected modesty; the *oraculum* (speaking in the epideictic vein, the language of the gods); the *diabole* (slandering, predicting the worst); the *argumentum ad populum* (flattering the people); the false dilemma (*crocodilities* – unacceptable choices); and, especially, the argument *ad verecundiam* (an appeal to traditional values, to the prescription of the Revolution). Only the last of these strategies involves a serious pretence of rationality; and

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<sup>423</sup> Preface in M. E. Bradford, *The Reactionary Imperative: Essays Literary and Political* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Co., 1990), pp. ii-iii.

<sup>424</sup> M. E. Bradford, “Lincoln and the Language of Hate and Fear: A View from the South,” in *Against the Barbarians and Other Reflections on Familiar Themes* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1992), p. 245.

<sup>425</sup> Bradford’s first challenge to Abraham Lincoln’s status was a 1971 essay entitled “Lincoln’s New Frontier: A Rhetoric for Continuing Revolution” that appeared in L. Brent Bozell’s traditionalist Catholic journal *Triumph* 6. Despite appearing in *Triumph* and working at a Jesuit university, Bradford was a Southern Methodist. His speeches were M. E. Bradford, “The Lincoln Legacy: A Long View,” *Modern Age* vol. 24, no. 4 (1980), originally delivered as a speech to the Philadelphia Society in New Orleans in November, 1979; and M. E. Bradford, “Against Lincoln: A Speech at Gettysburg,” in *The Reactionary Imperative: Essays Literary and Political* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Co, 1990), delivered at Gettysburg in September, 1984.

<sup>426</sup> Bradford, “Against Lincoln: A Speech at Gettysburg,” p. 221.

even appealing to an imaginary history, Lincoln is being duplicitous.”<sup>427</sup> Not an ethical rhetorician, Lincoln was a utopian ideologue and cynical political animal that alarmed and outraged the public to achieve his goals. There is some irony in this critique. Where William Buckley praised Lincoln’s language as inspirational and Frank Meyer criticised Lincoln by stripping him of his rhetorical shield – “Lincoln without Rhetoric” – Bradford located the heart of Lincoln’s duplicity in his rarefied language.

Lincoln’s political ends, along with his rhetorical and political persona, changed over his career. Bradford identified three distinct phases: Whig, Puritan, and Cromwellian.<sup>428</sup> Before 1854 Lincoln was essentially an orthodox Whig who frequently used homey Jacksonian language – “a potent and calculated brew”.<sup>429</sup> The Peoria speech marked the transition into the Puritanical phase of Lincoln’s career. Instead of accepting that this transformation was the result of a political evolution, as was usually held, Bradford contended that the overturning of the Missouri Compromise merely afforded Lincoln an opening through which to revive his failed political career. He could make hay out of opposition to slavery to challenge Stephen Douglas and wrench the Midwest out of the Democratic Party’s national coalition.<sup>430</sup> “When I say Lincoln was our first Puritan president”, explained Bradford, “I am chiefly referring to a distinction of style, to his habit of wrapping up his policy in the idiom of Holy Scripture, concealing within the Trojan Horse of his gasconade and moral superiority an agenda that never would have been approved if presented in any other form”.<sup>431</sup> The Puritanical Lincoln, he alleged, had a utopian vision and the “faith that he was able to perform this prophetic, teleological task”.<sup>432</sup> “[T]wo elements in this Lincoln... mark him as a dangerous man. The first is his faith in necessity, and his suspicion that he knows its disposition for the future... The second ingredient is a streak of rhetorical dishonesty, located primarily in his use of an *ad hominem* mask”.<sup>433</sup> Thus, Lincoln became the very Caesar he warned of in his Lyceum Address.

The final stage, the Cromwellian Lincoln of 1862-5, was the most dangerous and damaging to the American political tradition. In his rhetoric “the real is defined in terms of what is yet to come, and the meaning of the present lies only in its pointing thither”. When this type of

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>428</sup> Bradford, "The Lincoln Legacy: A Long View," p. 355.

<sup>429</sup> Bradford, "Against Lincoln: A Speech at Gettysburg," p. 222, 224.

<sup>430</sup> M. E. Bradford, "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," *Modern Age* vol. 23, no. 1 (1979), p. 17.

<sup>431</sup> Bradford, "The Lincoln Legacy: A Long View," p. 155.

<sup>432</sup> Bradford, "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," p. 20.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

outlook is bound to a political abstraction – in Lincoln’s case, equality – it “can have no other result than a totalitarian order”.<sup>434</sup> Like Meyer and Kendall, Bradford interpreted Lincoln’s presidency as a monumental step away from the ordered liberty of the Framers and toward tyranny.

Bradford’s early Lincoln criticism was always built from the foundation of an analysis of Lincoln’s rhetoric. His major argument held that Lincoln successfully employed utopian rhetoric to transform the United States from a “nomocratic” regime – ordered by laws and procedures – into a “teleocratic” regime – empowered to achieve the ends it determined as good over and above procedural form.<sup>435</sup> Once again, the allegation that Lincoln placed abstract rights above the Constitutional order was the focus of conservative ire.

Bradford drew heavily on the thought of Eric Voegelin, an intellectual admired among conservatives.<sup>436</sup> A German émigré and anti-totalitarian, Voegelin postulated that orthodox Christianity “de-divinised” society by bifurcating the spiritual and the temporal world, most powerfully through St. Augustine’s *City of God*. From the twelfth century on, however, Christian and secular thinkers began to break with the Augustinian worldview and reintroduce eschatological readings of history. Endowing history with meaning implies direction. Many reformers and revolutionaries have since attempted to make “immanent” any such historical meanings, thereby bringing about the “eschaton”. Speculations as to the *eidos* or meaning of history were alternatives to the orthodox (Augustinian) paradigm, similar to the early Christian Gnostic cults. Voegelin used “Gnostic” to describe claims of salvific knowledge (gnosis) that pertained to the bringing about, in a temporal sense, the final meaning of history and “a state of perfection”.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>435</sup> M. E. Bradford, “Rhetoric and Responsibility: Conservatives and the Problem of Language,” in *The Reactionary Imperative: Essays Literary and Political* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Co., 1990), p. 97, Bradford, “Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln’s Political Rhetoric,” pp. 11-12. The terms nomocratic and teleocratic are drawn from the work of English conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott, who Bradford described as “a thinker I find to be especially valuable in explaining the conduct of Southerners”. Bradford, “Where We Were Born and Raised,” p. 122.

<sup>436</sup> Simpson, “The Story of M. E. Bradford,” p. 103., M. E. Bradford, “Lincoln, the Declaration, and Secular Puritanism: A Rhetoric for Continuing Revolution,” in *A Better Guide Than Reason: Federalists and Anti-Federalists* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishing, 1994), Bradford wrote “[t]he use of the word ‘gnostic’ indicates that I presuppose throughout this essay the calculus of Professor Eric Voegelin”, p. 201. n.7

<sup>437</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 107-32. Quote p. 121. Also see McAllister, *Revolt against Modernity*, pp. 17-21. Voegelin rejected the label conservative but was popular among American conservatives at both a high theoretical level, as with Bradford and Kendall, and at a semi-popular level.

Gnosticism need not be religious, Voegelin noted. Modern forms of Gnosticism “may be primarily intellectual and assume the form of speculative penetration to the mystery of creation and existence” like “the contemplative gnosis of Hegel or Schelling”. Elsewise, it “may be primarily emotional and assume the form of an indwelling of divine substance in the human soul”. “Or it may be primarily volitional and assume the form of activist redemption of man and society, as in the instance of revolutionary activists like Comte, Marx, or Hitler”.<sup>438</sup> Bradford uncovered the political form of gnosis in Lincoln, “for the men who fall into these experiences divinise themselves by substituting more massive modes of participation in divinity for faith in the Christian sense”.<sup>439</sup>

Voegelin believed that there was a great danger in Gnosticism: God is sacrificed to civilisation and the spirit of life is killed.<sup>440</sup> The Gnostic obsession leads inevitably to a callousness toward the present and those who defend it. “The limit is reached when an activist sect which represents the Gnostic truth organises the civilisation into an empire under its rule. Totalitarianism, defined as the existential rule of Gnostic activists, is the end form of progressive civilisation”.<sup>441</sup>

Bradford was convinced that Lincoln had used intoxicating rhetoric to establish the “quasi-religion” of equality as a gnostic vision for America.<sup>442</sup> His gnosis was essentially Jacobin in character and his rhetorical idiom that of a “backcountry *philosophe*... a rational, progressivist superman”.<sup>443</sup> In his analysis of the Lyceum Address, Bradford – who intended it partly as a response to Jaffa’s *Crisis* – claimed that Lincoln employed the threat of civil violence and tyranny as a false dilemma to justify the transformation of the United States into a teleocratic regime based on “reason, cold, calculating, and unimpassioned reason”.<sup>444</sup> Superficially, the address was concerned with preserving the constitutional institutions of political life. However, “[u]pon examination of his entire text, it becomes quite clear that what the orator attempts through the arts of language is not preservation but change: radical alterations in the basis and organization of American society”.<sup>445</sup> Relying on Lincoln’s legal

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<sup>438</sup> Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, p. 124.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>442</sup> Bradford, "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," pp. 11-3.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., p. 11-12. Bradford is using Voegelin’s term and he makes an explicit reference to Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, in the body of his text.

<sup>444</sup> Bradford, "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," p. 11-12.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid., p. 11.



partner William Herndon's biography of the president, Bradford contended that his gnostic "Bonapartism" was fuelled by an overwhelming personal ambition.<sup>446</sup>

Lincoln's Jacobin rhetoric was transitory and he shifted to a rhetoric of righteous Puritanism. Bradford was particularly troubled by Lincoln's use of the tenor of the King James Bible – the language of the highest authority in post-Great-Awakening America. He held that Lincoln used this voice to venture beyond the political and into the moral, endowing his equalitarian vision with Patristic authority. When Lincoln spoke of "new birth", he meant the rejection of heritage in favour of the new founding promised in the Lyceum Address. When he said government of the people "shall not perish", he evoked John's Gospel. Not, as John intended, to mean that man shall not perish, but rather the re-divinised state.<sup>447</sup> At Lyceum, Lincoln preached from the "high temple" of Federalism "where liberty has its altar in the temple of philosophy".<sup>448</sup> The secular Gnosticism of Lincoln's civic religion was deeply anti-Christian as Lincoln made a conscious effort to either replace or subsume the Church within faith in the State.<sup>449</sup>

Eventually, Lincoln lost "himself completely in an idiom for calling forth the New Jerusalem" of equality.<sup>450</sup> Lincoln believed "every 'good cause' [was] a reason for increasing the scope of government". He maintained that in Lincoln's political thought, "[a]ll that matters is the *telos*, the general objective, and bullying is not merely allowed, but required".<sup>451</sup> The Second Inaugural Address was the final revelation of Lincoln's heretofore concealed millennialism. Lincoln looked to Providence and in it saw his reflection; in victory he became "a scripture unto himself".<sup>452</sup> As per Voegelin, the Gnostic outlook is inherently totalitarian: Lincoln's accumulation of executive powers in pursuit of equality was indicative of his equalitarian nature. "It would be simple enough", noted Bradford, a Southern Methodist, "to be ruled directly by messages from God. But an imitation of that arrangement

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<sup>446</sup> Bradford, "Lincoln and the Language of Hate and Fear: A View from the South," p. 231.

<sup>447</sup> Bradford, "Lincoln, the Declaration, and Secular Puritanism: A Rhetoric for Continuing Revolution," pp. 185-194. Bradford located a trend toward Puritan Gnosticism in the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

<sup>448</sup> Bradford, "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," p. 13.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

<sup>451</sup> Bradford, "The Lincoln Legacy: A Long View," p. 155.

<sup>452</sup> M. E. Bradford, "The Heresy of Equality: A Reply to Harry Jaffa," in *Lincoln's American Dream: Clashing Political Perspectives*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Joseph L. Fournier (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), p. 146.

leaves us uneasy... Under such circumstances the worry is that we are more likely to arrive at the final plain of desolation than to a happy port in the New Zion of the Puritan vision.”<sup>453</sup>

Not only had Lincoln succeeded in transforming the Founding into the juggernaut of modern federal government. Bradford’s capped his case against Lincoln by criticising his use of pseudo-Christian rhetoric leading to its permanent entrenchment in political discourse. Lincoln’s moral idiom, sacralised by martyrdom, enshrined the “trends he set in motion with his executive fiat”. It became, Bradford discovered, “both unpatriotic and irreligious to look behind the words of so august a presence”.<sup>454</sup>

Bradford repeated the frequent conservative allegation against Lincoln. In pursuit of the Gnostic impulse, Lincoln distorted the meaning of the Founding and the Declaration of Independence. Bradford accepted the interpretation of the Declaration held by both his mentor, Donald Davidson, and Willmoore Kendall.<sup>455</sup> He injected himself into Jaffa’s debate with Kendall, commenting that his purview was to challenge Jaffa, whose theoretical foundation “lead him to conclusions so very different from my own”.<sup>456</sup> Bradford claimed that the equality of opportunity that Jaffa suggested characterised Lincoln’s thought was axiomatically impossible. It led inevitably toward a policy of equality of outcome. Lincoln was champion of the ersatz tradition that saw in the Declaration a promise of equality to be fulfilled in the unfolding of history. Not only was this dangerous – “a splendid edifice built upon a keg of gunpowder” – but wrongheaded: Lincoln had deliberately misinterpreted Jefferson’s intentions.<sup>457</sup> The Declaration was not revolutionary in nature. It merely affirmed the presiding status quo of the colonies and Britain as “Englishmen with a difference”. In the context of a dispute between Englishmen over the rights of Englishmen, it was little more than the divorce between the colonies and George III.

It was Lincoln that secured the mundane Declaration its legacy as “pure gnostic force”.<sup>458</sup> In truth, when the Founders declared “all men were created equal”, they meant the free men of the newly independent states, “not as individuals, but rather in their corporate capacity”.<sup>459</sup> “Therefore, the following ‘all men’—created equal in their right to expect from any

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<sup>453</sup> Bradford, “The Lincoln Legacy: A Long View,” pp. 155-6.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>455</sup> Bailey, “M. E. Bradford, the Reagan Right, and the Resurgence of Confederate Nationalism,” p. 294.

<sup>456</sup> Bradford, “The Heresy of Equality: A Reply to Harry Jaffa,” p. 133., M. E. Bradford, “How to Read the Declaration: Reconsidering the Kendall Thesis,” *The Intercollegiate Review* vol. 28, no. 1 (1992), pp. 45-50.

<sup>457</sup> Bradford, “Where We Were Born and Raised,” pp. 122-5.

<sup>458</sup> Bradford, “The Heresy of Equality: A Reply to Harry Jaffa,” p. 136.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., pp. 138-9.

government to which they might submit freedom from corporate bondage, genocide, and massive confiscation—are persons prudent together, respectful of the law which makes them one, even though forced to stand henceforth apart: equal as one free state is as free as another”.<sup>460</sup> The text of the Declaration makes petitions against Native Americans, slaves, and the King’s use of foreign mercenaries. Surely, Bradford appealed, such “racist, xenophobic, and religious assumptions have no place in the expression of philosophic truth”.<sup>461</sup> They would, however, not be out of place in a document of prescriptive law – “And therefore”, concluded Bradford, “in our Declaration of Independence”.<sup>462</sup>

Like Kendall, Bradford’s anti-Lincolnianism had a largely theoretical component. Lincoln had transformed the United States of the Framers into a regime ordered by the *telos* of equality, consistently expanding the powers of the executive to do so. But Bradford also went further than Kendall or Meyer in his criticism of Lincoln. He imputed bad faith and malicious intent into each of the president’s actions. He felt a real antipathy toward Lincoln, admitting to experiencing waves of loathing whenever he saw the Lincoln Memorial.<sup>463</sup> Bradford’s animus was personal and as much with Lincoln the man as with his legacy.

In his portrait, Abraham Lincoln was extraordinarily manipulative and ambitious. Instead of buffeted by the storms of conflict, Bradford’s Lincoln dominated the Civil War for his own and Republican benefit; he was at “the heart of the major political events of his era”.<sup>464</sup> Lincoln claimed to have been controlled by events. Bradford alleged that, in reality, his *modus operandi* was to “[w]ait, set up or encourage pressure, then jump, and call it God”.<sup>465</sup>

Lincoln’s rhetoric developed as he discovered more effective means of manipulating the nation. His re-emergence at Peoria as an opponent of slavery was motivated purely by political opportunism. Lincoln recognised that anti-slavery had significantly more traction than traditional Whig issues, so the Kansas-Nebraska Act became a bludgeon with which to attack Douglas and the Democratic coalition.<sup>466</sup> Since the whole nation shared the same racist outlook, Bradford argued, the Northern Whigs’ emphasis on slavery was motivated by a

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Gary Cartwright, "Mr. Right," *Texas Monthly*, March 1992, <http://www.texasmonthly.com/content/mr-right-0>.

<sup>464</sup> Bradford, "The Lincoln Legacy: A Long View," pp. 143-4.

<sup>465</sup> Bradford, "The Heresy of Equality: A Reply to Harry Jaffa," p. 143.

<sup>466</sup> Bradford, "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," pp. 16-17.

desire to cripple the Southern way of life rather than genuine concern for slaves.<sup>467</sup> Lincoln advised his party to emphasise slavery to form a Northern sectional party and mask their plans to affect wide-ranging Whig policies. His anti-slavery was purely abstract: he emphasised the Declaration of Independence but left the Illinois state black codes in place and offered no real opportunity for advancement to freed slaves. Furthermore, anti-slavery was regional in nature. For geographical reasons Northerners were exempt from the forthcoming social upheaval that would ravage the South.<sup>468</sup> The disconnect between Lincoln's rhetorical platitudes and his conduct was immense. "[His] double-talk left his part of the country with a durable heritage of pious self-congratulation... Left it with the habit of concealing its larger objectives behind a façade of racial generosity, of using the Negro as a reason for policies and laws which make only minimal alterations to his condition; and also with the habit of seeming to offer a great deal more than it is willing to give".<sup>469</sup> Moreover, Bradford suggested that the North's self-righteous satisfaction continued into the twentieth century.

The historic Lincoln was a consummate schemer, skilled with pork-barrel patronage. His political economy followed the formula of "tax and tax, spend and spend".<sup>470</sup> It took, Bradford noted bitterly, the secession of the South and a "High Whig" in the Oval Office to enact, after "four-score and seven years", the Hamiltonian dream of "energetic government".<sup>471</sup> Lincoln's claim that government ought to do for a community "whatever they need to have done, but can not do, *at all*, or can not, *so well*, for themselves" was a blank cheque for governmental expansion that led directly to the rise of the welfare state.<sup>472</sup>

In economics, Lincoln was a disaster. Before his rise to national office, he had all but bankrupted Illinois with a poorly-conceived infrastructural project. As president, the national banking system was expanded massively; specie depreciated in value by two-thirds; and the tariff rose from 18.84% to 47.56%, staying above 40% for all but two years until the Wilson Administration.<sup>473</sup> More than an inept manager, Lincoln indulged governmental and

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>468</sup> Bradford, "The Lincoln Legacy: A Long View," pp. 144-6.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>470</sup> Bradford, "Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln's Political Rhetoric," p. 14.

<sup>471</sup> Bradford, "The Lincoln Legacy: A Long View," p. 147.

<sup>472</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln on Democracy*, ed. Mario M. Cuomo and Harold Holzer, 1st Fordham University Press ed. (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 64., Bradford, "Against Lincoln: A Speech at Gettysburg," p. 222.

<sup>473</sup> Bradford, "The Lincoln Legacy: A Long View," pp. 147-8.

commercial cronyism, justifying it by military necessity. The seeds of the corrupt and rapacious Gilded Age were sown by Lincoln.<sup>474</sup>

His record on civil liberties was further proof of his wickedness. Between April 12 and July 4, 1861, Lincoln governed without Congress, as de facto dictator. By pleading necessity for his huge expansions of the government Lincoln retained his façade of modest Whiggery with Jacksonian window-dressing.<sup>475</sup> Bradford recited the classic litany of Lincoln's violations of political rights: seizure of property; arrest of up to twenty-thousand political opponents, and their confinement without trial in "a Northern 'Gulag'"; the closure of over three hundred newspapers; and the importation of massive numbers of foreign mercenaries.<sup>476</sup> Lincoln flagrantly ignored the Constitution: the Emancipation Proclamation and formation of West Virginia both trampled the Constitution for "expediency's" sake.<sup>477</sup> In his hands, the war was more than an engine for preserving the Union; it was a tool for the transformation of the Union's very nature.<sup>478</sup>

Bradford also blamed Lincoln for precipitating the war. Misguided in believing a Southern majority would remain loyal to the Union, he had woefully underestimated Southern regionalism. Bradford regarded the South's obduracy as a wholesale revolution against Lincoln's Northern industrialism. Further, Lincoln needed a national crisis: the Lyceum prediction required disorder. "Though he was no sadist and no warmonger, and though he got for his pains much more of a conflict than he had in mind, Lincoln hoped for an 'insurrection' of some sort – an uprising he could use".<sup>479</sup> As he admitted to Orville Browning "the plan succeeded. They attacked Sumter, it fell, and thus did more service than it otherwise could".<sup>480</sup>

Finally, as Commander-in-Chief, Lincoln was an incompetent and a brute. Motivated by gnostic equalitarianism and Republican ambition, he was surpassingly callous toward both Southerners and "Billy Yank" on the front lines. Lack of concern for men under arms was evident in the appointment of party hack Simon Cameron as Secretary of War, and the

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid., p. 150. It appears that Bradford, who gave the figure of foreign mercenaries at "perhaps five hundred thousand men", meant all immigrants who fought for the Union in the Civil War, approximately 23% of the Union enlistment.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

tolerance of rotten supply contracts. In a campaign of breath-taking cynicism, Lincoln manipulated the war effort and the army for explicit Republican gain, rigging the system to secure the military vote for the 1864 election. However, “all such mendacity was nothing in comparison to the price in blood paid for Lincoln’s attempts to give the nation a genuine Republican hero”.<sup>481</sup> Bradford claimed that Lincoln made his military appointments based on political opinions rather than expertise. Those that failed to show ideological purity were cashiered or demoted – “scapegoats thrown by Lincoln to the radical wolves”. His chosen generals were “right-thinking incompetents”, appointments his chief-of-staff called “little better than murder”. It was only when Grant and Sherman “converted” to radicalism that Lincoln’s disastrous policy finally abated.<sup>482</sup>

Lincoln was a cynical dictator and manipulative ideologue but his assassination transfigured the “secular puritan” into an American manifestation of the “dying god”.<sup>483</sup> Death enshrined his political programme and placed a divine stamp on his image forever.<sup>484</sup> Bradford was convinced that the dominance of big government liberalism was founded on the Lincoln myth, now outside the bounds of historical inquiry.<sup>485</sup> By overturning the image, Bradford sought to show that Lincoln “left behind him a trail of blood, an emancipation under the worst possible circumstances, and a political example which continues to injure the Republic which he did so much to undermine. It is at our peril that we continue to reverence his name”.<sup>486</sup> At the very least, Bradford hoped he might deprive progressives of the Lincoln myth, who, in their “apostate vanity” and “intellectual arrogance”, would use it “to accomplish their distortion”. In a moment of conciliation, Bradford admitted that “[i]n all his protean complexity, the sad man from Illinois deserves a better fate”.<sup>487</sup>

On the whole, however, Bradford’s portrait was remarkable for his candid bitterness toward Lincoln. In this, his thinking was informed by Lost Cause nostalgia. Bradford’s Southern identity and attendant conservatism were marrow-deep: “I inherited what Burke called a prescriptive identity, just as I inherited my identity”.<sup>488</sup> Born in Fort Worth, Bradford was a sixth generation Texan with heritage in Alabama and Tennessee. His was still, in many ways,

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., pp. 150-1.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>484</sup> Bradford, “Dividing the House: The Gnosticism of Lincoln’s Political Rhetoric,” p. 20.

<sup>485</sup> Bradford, “The Lincoln Legacy: A Long View,” p. 143.

<sup>486</sup> Bradford, “Lincoln and the Language of Hate and Fear: A View from the South,” p. 245.

<sup>487</sup> Bradford, “Against Lincoln: A Speech at Gettysburg,” pp. 225-6.

<sup>488</sup> Cartwright, “Mr. Right,” <http://www.texasmonthly.com/content/mr-right-0>.

a Confederate family. “We were a story-telling people. All my life I heard stories about the Civil War, particularly from my grandmother and great-uncle... Emerson says that everyone belongs to the ‘party of memory’ or the ‘party of hope’, and I grew up within the party of memory. Reconstructing the past helped my family define who we were”.<sup>489</sup>

Bradford succeeded in a school system overwhelmingly Southern in its curriculum.<sup>490</sup> The Texan universities were deemed overly radical, so he attended the University of Oklahoma on a Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps scholarship. After serving briefly on the *USS Hornet*, Bradford joined the teaching staff at the Naval Academy.<sup>491</sup> Naval service was a period of political reflection for Bradford. “That’s where I realised that the point of departure in my thinking was different than most other Americans”.<sup>492</sup> “I was simply a Southerner like my father and grandfathers, which meant a conservative Democrat with political antecedents running back through secession to Thomas Jefferson, the Antifederalists, and the English Country Party tradition”.<sup>493</sup> Bradford gravitated toward Vanderbilt University, the old intellectual cradle of the Southern Agrarians.<sup>494</sup> Its English department “was a veritable nursery of intellectual conservatism”.<sup>495</sup> Davidson’s supervision was particularly formative; “I for one could never commence any project without feeling that I performed against his measure and beneath his eye”, Bradford noted.<sup>496</sup> Bradford imbibed the Agrarians’ critique. The mythopoeic South of their manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand* reflected the world in which he was “born and raised”.<sup>497</sup> The Old South, imaginatively reconstructed, was an existential challenge to the state of modernity. The Agrarians’ South was not moonlight and magnolias, but a reminder of the path that America should have followed, one that kept fidelity with the Jeffersonian promise of the Founders. It was both a metaphorical rebuke to the modern United States and a distant alternative to capitalist industrialism.<sup>498</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid.

<sup>490</sup> Bailey, "M. E. Bradford, the Reagan Right, and the Resurgence of Confederate Nationalism," p. 293.

<sup>491</sup> M. E. Bradford, "Memories," *Modern Age* vol. 26, no. 3-4 (1982), pp. 242-3.

<sup>492</sup> Cartwright, "Mr. Right," <http://www.texasmonthly.com/content/mr-right-0>.

<sup>493</sup> Bradford, "Memories," p. 242.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid. Bradford knew of Davidson and his student Richard Weaver from their role on the advisory board of *Modern Age*.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid.

<sup>496</sup> M. E. Bradford, "Donald Davidson: 1893-1968," *The Southern Review* vol. 4, no. 4 (1968), p. 1111.

<sup>497</sup> M E Bradford, "The Agrarian Tradition: An Affirmation," in *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 83.

<sup>498</sup> The essential text of the Southern Agrarians was the 1930 manifesto, Donald Davidson, ed. *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, by 12 Southerners, 1st Harper Torchbook ed. (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1962), featuring essays by Davidson, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Frank Owsley, John Crowe Ransom and the other major Agrarians. Each provided their own contribution to the Agrarian view and subscribed to the central essay laying out their position. They were not, however, an entirely homogenous

There was, for Bradford, an important distinction between a conservative who is Southern and a Southern conservative.<sup>499</sup> Southern conservatism was a cultural and political formulation based on the unique character of the South.<sup>500</sup> In interpreting the South, Bradford relied on Davidson and Vanderbilt historian and Agrarian, Frank Owsley. They downplayed the importance of slavery and the planter class to the antebellum South, emphasising instead the yeoman class. The South, they said, had been an organic, unified social order that secured both individual rights and liberty within a collective community. The Southern character was proud, honourable, and aware of the limitations of human nature; bound by kinship, family, society, and God, but independent of formal political structures.<sup>501</sup> Vestiges of the Southern social structure survived the Civil War in the conservatism that Bradford affirmed. Southern conservatives were non-ideological. They did not thirst for normative principals but were satisfied with the wisdom received from their forebears as Christians and as Americans in the tradition of English Whigs. It was the oldest American conservatism, different from “Crown and Altar” toryism and as antithetical to libertarianism as it was to egalitarianism. Southern conservatism was individualism within a powerful social bond.<sup>502</sup> For Bradford, as with Davidson, his heritage endowed him with identity and history, and gave authority to his values.<sup>503</sup>

Bradford’s Southern partisanship is the obvious source of his antipathy toward Lincoln. The faith of his fathers had been secession and the Confederacy. In 1957 Davidson published *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*, a collection of essays articulating his rejection of the notion of coherent United States and belief, instead, in distinct American sections. His title exemplified Bradford: he was a Rebel still and, drawing his identity from the well of Southern history, he

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movement and gradually drifted apart, despite several reunions. The Agrarians have been widely analysed: two good discussions are Mark G. Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), and Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), and a brief but sympathetic and insightful study of the Agrarians and Southern conservatism more broadly was made in Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), Genovese came to adopt many of the aspects of Southern conservatism.

<sup>499</sup> M E Bradford, *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. xiv.

<sup>500</sup> Bradford, “Where We Were Born and Raised,” pp. 122-3.

<sup>501</sup> Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South*, pp. 167-72.

<sup>502</sup> Bradford, “Where We Were Born and Raised,” pp. 115-29.

<sup>503</sup> Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South*, pp. 12, 155-9.; Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought*, p. 7. Murphy notes the irony in Davidson, “the most reactionary of the original Agrarians”, developing the very modern notion of Southern-ness as identity politics.



could have been no other. For a man who was historian-in-chief and a commander in the Sons of Confederate Veterans, and recipient of the Confederate Legion of Merit, seeing Lincoln as an enemy was the natural outgrowth of his identity.<sup>504</sup> Bradford's major interlocutor on Lincoln, the indefatigable Harry Jaffa, made the point glibly: "Lincoln stole Mel Bradford's great-grandfather's slaves".<sup>505</sup> After Bradford's death, Jaffa eulogised him by expounding on his "loyalty to the Old South – the South of which he knew from what he regarded as the only ultimately reliable authority, namely 'our fathers'".<sup>506</sup> Indeed, many of Bradford's arguments revived those made in the ante- and early post-bellum South, particularly Alexander Stephens and Jefferson Davis's post-war apologies. The journal *Southern Partisan* called Bradford the "guardian of the tablets" and, in this regard, he was.<sup>507</sup> A true believer in patrimony, Bradford's fathers (or great-grandfathers, in his case) were Confederate soldiers. He was carrying on the struggle through an intellectual defence of the South against the North. Lincoln, the Yankee Commander-in-Chief, remained his principal foe.

Bradford, however, departed somewhat from his teachers. The Agrarians were convinced that Lincoln was almost untouchable. There appeared to be "a Lincoln cult bordering on pagan deification", Frank Owsley wrote. Scholars have "followed their emotions and bias to overemphasise certain elements and minimise others". The Agrarians did not criticise Lincoln's character, however, but his lack of judgement.<sup>508</sup> Like Bradford, Davidson followed Owsley's interpretation of the War as a campaign of intellectual and cultural aggression by the industrial Northern against the agrarian South. The Northern assault cast aside the Founders' compromises and established Northern interests as the national interest. The Northern heretics sought to subvert the republican ideals of America, still kept to in the South, with the industrialist ideology of the *philosophes*. Davidson identified the Radical Republicans and their intellectual allies like Horace Greeley, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Beecher Stowe as the drivers of the Northern intellectual assault. Lincoln, a moderate opponent of slavery, they argued, was not generally antagonistic toward the South. It was the

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<sup>504</sup> James McClellan, "Defending the High Ground: The Legacy of M. E. Bradford," *Modern Age* vol. 36, no. 3 (1994), p. 38. Bradford was also the editor of *Southern Partisan* from 1990 and played a role in its founding.

<sup>505</sup> Cartwright, "Mr. Right," <http://www.texasmonthly.com/content/mr-right-0>.

<sup>506</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "In Abraham's Bosom," *National Review* vol. 45, no. 7 (1993), p. 50.

<sup>507</sup> McClellan, "Defending the High Ground: The Legacy of M. E. Bradford," p. 43., Bailey, "M. E. Bradford, the Reagan Right, and the Resurgence of Confederate Nationalism," p. 306.

<sup>508</sup> Frank Owsley, "A Southerner's View of Abraham Lincoln," in *The South: Old and New Frontiers*, ed. Harriet Chappell Owsley (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 224.

anti-South faction that convinced Lincoln of a slave-power conspiracy. Lincoln needed to secure Union and prevent Southern sectional interests overtaking Northern ones (that is, those Lincoln believed to be the national interests). He was tragically mistaken. The South had no intention of challenging the Northern way of life but, if roused, it would fight until the last. Bradford rejected any clemency toward the historic Lincoln. His Lincoln was not swayed by radical rhetoric but the very source of cultural aggression. Bradford essentially distilled the Agrarian argument of a Northern cultural assault and attributed it to the person of Lincoln. In each of his stages, Lincoln was the ideal form of the anti-Southern Yankee gnostic. The Northern cultural edifice remained the aggressor in the war on the South and broader American tradition but in Lincoln Bradford had a personification of the Northern challenge. In part the focus on Lincoln had an epideictic function. Bradford's writing was rhetorically minded and Lincoln was a useful shorthand; a clear target for neo-Confederate wrath and a synecdochic version of Davidson's Northern culture war. Bradford's true enemy was always modernity and, in the sweep of American history, Lincoln became the symbolic and historical harbinger of modernity. By criticising Lincoln, Bradford was attacking the very idea of modernity as much as he was challenging the historical figure.

Debasing the Lincoln symbol was necessary for Bradford's project. Steeped in the Agrarian reverence for poetic imagery, he understood the rhetorical authority of the Lincoln image. Bradford hoped for the replacement of the modern, industrial society with the [re]established Southern way of life. By its very existence, the mythopoeic South was a challenge to modernity. However, the form the Lincoln image began to take during the latter half of the twentieth century was noxious to the Agrarian's mythic South. From the 1960s onward Lincoln's greatness was linked to his role in the abolition of slavery. The Old South that Bradford and his predecessors presented significantly downplayed the role of slavery. Its palatability as a rebuke to modernity was contingent on understating the "peculiar institution's" centrality to Southern society. "Lincoln the Emancipator" was a constant reminder of Southern complicity in the great sin of slavery. To maintain his own symbol, Bradford needed to radically undermine the Emancipator image and the role of slavery in the cause of the war. To that end he was eager to portray Lincoln as a racist, imperialist, Puritan Bonaparte, willing to use duplicitous rhetoric to advance the Northern, and his own, interests. If the Lincoln myth stood, the Agrarians' Old South could not. Bradford confronted this challenge in a way his forebears had not needed to. The shift in focus from Lincoln as saviour of the Union to Lincoln as Emancipator presented Bradford with a challenge the original

Agrarians had not faced. This is not to suggest, however, that Bradford did not genuinely believe he had captured Lincoln's true nature in ways that defenders of the president had not. No, Bradford was too much a partisan of the South not to see Lincoln in this light and too candid and gentlemanly a debater to falsify his conclusions for ideological gain.

Bradford fit less than comfortably within the broader conservative movement. He joined the Republican Party and, in some ways, it was a natural shift: the Democratic Party increasingly favoured big-government solutions and liberal positions on social issues. The conservative wing of the Republican Party became a refuge for many conservative Democrats. Jaffa noted:

We shared a hatred of Communism abroad and socialism at home. We both loathed 'race-based remedies.' We felt much the same way about the liberal statism that would replace the family and its extension in neighbourhood communities, neighbourhood schools, neighbourhood churches and synagogues, and voluntary charitable organizations. In fact, we shared a conviction concerning states' rights, even though Mel, following John C. Calhoun, could not see the connection that I (and Abraham Lincoln) saw between states' and natural rights.

Above all, we shared a hatred for that acid of modernity, moral relativism, which lay at the heart of the welfare state, and which was dissolving the very basis of our civilization.<sup>509</sup>

Even so, the conservatism of the Reagan Revolution embraced freemarket policies and a hawkish tone foreign policy that Bradford, closer to the pre-Buckley Old Right, struggled to countenance.<sup>510</sup>

Within the conservative intellectual milieu, Bradford was in good standing. Jeffrey Hart, in particular, was complimentary about Bradford. He was an "American Plutarch" and "Confederate Voegelin", "engaged in a long and valuable dispute about the legacy of Abraham Lincoln".<sup>511</sup> Bradford was especially important to a circle of traditionalist, mostly

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<sup>509</sup> Jaffa, "In Abraham's Bosom," p. 50.

<sup>510</sup> Bradford, *The Reactionary Imperative: Essays Literary and Political*, pp. 91-134. In three essays Bradford analyses the problems of the conservative movement in power and the nature of his views. He was straightforwardly conservative on the need for a strong military, but strongly opposed the notion of crusading on an international level.

<sup>511</sup> Jeffrey Hart, "Mel Bradford, RIP," *National Review* vol. 45, no. 6 (1993), pp. 19-20. He noted further that "It boiled down to the question of whether Lincoln was a revolutionary who had fundamentally changed the Constitution. Voting aye were Bradford, Edmund Wilson, James McPherson, and Garry Wills. Voting nay were

Southern, thinkers. Given the breadth and erudition of his work, there was at least a tolerance for Bradford's anti-Lincolnianism among conservatives, although many were not entirely convinced. His Lincoln articles were often paired with a response from Harry Jaffa and the two maintained a vigorous debate through various avenues for over two decades. In speeches and in print Bradford's views were given an airing, although usually with a Jaffaite pro-Lincoln rejoinder.<sup>512</sup>

Bradford's animus toward Lincoln might have remained within the conservative traditionalist and Southern intellectual ghettos had it not become a political cudgel. Bradford expected and received the nomination for the chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in the early days of the Reagan administration. When details of his nomination leaked, it begat a small storm. Bradford let it be known that he intended to curb support for "cultural populism" in favour of "Western Civilisation" and "see that conservatives get a better shake than they did in [his predecessor's] regime". He was a colourful figure whose views were easily mined for headlines. Within the administration there was a backlash against Bradford, allegedly spearheaded by Irving Kristol. The neoconservative faction, of which Kristol was a leading figure, had been rivals of the Southern conservatives in the old Democratic coalition, they were now competitors for influence within the new Republican majority. They favoured Democrat William Bennett for the chairmanship. A memorandum, "Quotations from Chairman Mel", circulated amongst White House Staffers, emphasising, among other things, Bradford's anti-Lincoln views.<sup>513</sup> Syndicated pundit George Will argued in his column that Bradford's nomination was a provocation and gift to the left. Echoing Jaffa, Will believed Lincoln was "the greatest statesman in the history of democracy because he drew a line in the dust, limiting popular sovereignty". "It is not harmless for a great political party to mock its noble past"; it would be a tactical error and a gross mistake for Reagan to force through the

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Walter Berns, Harry Jaffa, George Will, and, we hazard, a consensus of historians". Elsewhere, Jaffa contended that Hart agreed with Bradford's argument, although not necessarily on his condemnation of Lincoln.

<sup>512</sup> Bradford had many essays or reviews published in *National Review* and *American Spectator* although his work and thought was most suited to the longer form and more literary *Modern Age*. He spoke at a number of conservative destinations including Hillsdale College, the Heritage Foundation, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and the Philadelphia Society, where he served as president between 1984-6.

Jaffa and Bradford were paired in *National Review*, *Modern Age*, and the *American Spectator* over a ten year period. They were also paired in seminars to speak after one another. Jaffa said of Bradford "We were... so convinced that the conflict that centred on the figure of Abraham Lincoln was the central conflict in American, perhaps even world, history that we came to constitute a fellowship of our own". in Jaffa, "In Abraham's Bosom," p. 50.

<sup>513</sup> Bailey, "M. E. Bradford, the Reagan Right, and the Resurgence of Confederate Nationalism," pp. 298-9.

nomination of a “shrill despiser of the first Republican president”.<sup>514</sup> Bradford’s candidacy gained the approval of thirty Republican Senators and the written support of many conservative academics, including Jaffa. Ultimately, however, Bennett was nominated and appointed; Bradford’s published comments on Lincoln apparently a decisive factor. Bradford was bitterly disappointed. His allies interpreted Bennett’s selection as a neoconservative triumph for liberalism over authentic conservatism. They believed the use of Bradford’s academic Lincoln views to attack his political life to be ruthlessly cynical.<sup>515</sup>

Mel Bradford was a throwback. His views on politics, the South, and Lincoln were, in the Reagan years, anachronistic. The Southern conservatism he treasured was in part opposed to and otherwise subsumed into the Reaganite conservative movement. He stood against the federal government at a time when the conservative movement controlled the White House and the apparatus of state for the first time. During Bradford’s later years there was an influx into the conservative movement of thinkers with a greater level of comfort with the federal government. With their liberal intellectual foundations, the neoconservatives saw a definite role for the government in both domestic and international settings. The increasing influence of the Jaffaite “West Coast” Straussians contributed to a considerable shift in the movement, creating space for a conservatism of natural rights. Likewise, the influential George Will advanced the idea of “statecraft as soulcraft”.<sup>516</sup> Instead of being demonised as an abuser of federal power, Lincoln became the model of salutary, even beneficent, executive leadership. A conservative Lincoln was beginning to emerge along clearly Jaffaite terms.<sup>517</sup> Similarly, in contrast to Bradford’s agrarian vision, Reagan’s economic reforms and the Kempian emphasis on the power of the market allowed Lincoln to be praised precisely as an exponent of the industrial capitalism Bradford deplored. Later conservatives, including Allen Guelzo and Rich Lowry, have proclaimed a conservative Lincoln along these very lines.<sup>518</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> George F. Will, “Bradford Nomination Would Be Gift to Dems,” *Syndicated Column*, Dec 3 1981, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2519&dat=19811203&id=GqZdAAAAIBAJ&sjid=JF0NAAAAIBAJ&pg=4624,368075>.

<sup>515</sup> Bailey, “M. E. Bradford, the Reagan Right, and the Resurgence of Confederate Nationalism,” pp. 298-9.

<sup>516</sup> George F. Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1983), *passim*.

<sup>517</sup> In Jaffa’s own work, still frequently published in major conservative journals, as well as his students, and others like Lewis E. Lehrman.

<sup>518</sup> Allen C. Guelzo, “Our Lincoln,” *National Review* vol. 61, no. 3 (2009), or Allen C. Guelzo, “Mr. Lincoln’s Economics Primer,” *National Review* vol. LXII, no. 23 (2010), and Rich Lowry, *Lincoln Unbound: How an Ambitious Young Railsplitter Saved the American Dream - and How We Can Do It Again* (New York, NY: Broadside Books, 2013), *forthcoming*.

Following the nomination battle, Bradford entered a remarkably productive period until his death. He rededicated himself to the anti-Lincoln position, several of his most strident anti-Lincoln works appearing after 1981. Politically, he grew increasingly disillusioned with the Reagan administration's inability to enact a conservative transformation and was frequently critical of the influence of the neoconservatives. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, his political allegiances placed him closer to the emerging paleoconservative reaction to the state of the Republican Party than the mainline party. His work appeared increasingly often in the paleoconservative journal *Chronicles*.<sup>519</sup> Bradford retained a coterie of traditionalist intellectual allies and disciples that, at the time of his death, included "Russell Kirk, Forrest McDonald, Frederick Wilhelmsen, Thomas Landess, Samuel Francis, Jeffrey Hart, Thomas Fleming, Clyde Wilson, and [James McClellan]" – many Southern and most involved with the paleoconservative dissent.<sup>520</sup>

Even if his politics were closer to the paleoconservative position, Bradford retained relatively good standing within the wider movement. He still appeared frequently in *Modern Age*, *The American Spectator*, and the Heritage Foundation's *Policy Review*.<sup>521</sup> Between 1981 and 1991, *National Review*, still the primary journal of big-tent conservatism, published seventeen articles by Bradford and reviewed his work favourably. Toward the end of the decade, however, there was a shift away from his position on Lincoln. Late in 1989, *National Review* ran a review of Don Fehrenbacher's *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings* by *Chronicles* editor and Bradford associate Thomas Fleming. Under the heading "Lincoln's Tragic Heroism", Fleming advanced, with explicit reference to Bradford, a restatement of Bradford's attack on Lincoln. Lincoln, he wrote, "reforged the old federal Republic into a nation 'dedicated to a proposition'. That dedication has meant... Wilsonian crusades to save and extend democracy, the New Deal with its labyrinth of welfare entitlements, and the civil rights revolution which now extends the status of privileged minority to fully three-fourths of the population".<sup>522</sup> These grievances reflect the complaints paleoconservatives levelled at the Straussian and neoconservative branches of conservatism and modernity broadly. "There is" Fleming concluded, "no doubt of Lincoln's greatness... He is our Julius Caesar, our Cromwell... However, among conservatives who still refuse to seek salvation in the state,

<sup>519</sup>McClellan, "Defending the High Ground: The Legacy of M. E. Bradford," p. 38. During this period Bradford had fourteen articles published in *Chronicles*, appearing increasingly frequently.

<sup>520</sup> McClellan, "Defending the High Ground: The Legacy of M. E. Bradford," p. 39.

<sup>521</sup> Since the NEH dispute, Bradford's work appeared eight times in *Modern Age*, three times in *The American Spectator*, and four times in *Policy Review*.

<sup>522</sup> Thomas Fleming, "Lincoln's Tragic Heroism," *National Review* vol. 41, no. 23 (1989), p. 40.

there ought to be room for a small remnant of doubters who prefer Cato to Caesar, Falkland to Cromwell, and the corrupt Stephen Douglas to the not entirely incorruptible Abraham Lincoln".<sup>523</sup> Fleming's review was the last anti-Lincoln article printed by *National Review* – although the magazine reprinted Willmoore Kendall's critical-yet-laudatory review of Jaffa's *Crisis of the House Divided* in 1995 when *Crisis* was republished. In the month following Fleming's review, *NR* printed a response from Harry Jaffa, a consummate demolition of Fleming's – and Bradford's – position.<sup>524</sup> The ideological disparity over Lincoln between Bradford and *National Review* was brought to a head in 1991 when the magazine refused to publish Bradford's review of *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* by James McPherson – a mainstream scholar admired on the right. In response, Bradford concluded his two and a half decade long relationship with the journal.<sup>525</sup> Reflecting the shift toward the Jaffaite position within the conservative mainstream, future references to Lincoln in *National Review* were largely positive. References to Lincoln were frequently along specifically Jaffaite lines – including those written by Jaffa himself and his students, namely Charles Kesler and Ken Masugi – or tended to associated Lincoln with contemporary conservative figures like Reagan or George W. Bush. This trend was not universal. Outside the conservative mainstream, the traditionalist *Modern Age* remained wary of the Straussian inflected Lincoln. Upon Bradford's death a significant part of an issue was dedicated to memorialising and affirming their late contributor.<sup>526</sup> In spite of conservatism's growing comfort with Lincoln, there remained in the traditionalist, Southern, and paleoconservative camps (ones with much overlap), a prejudice for the American Cato over the American Caesar.

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, "Lincoln's Character Assassins," *National Review* vol. 40, no. 1 (1990), pp. 34-8.

<sup>525</sup> Cartwright, "Mr. Right," <http://www.texasmonthly.com/content/mr-right-0>.

<sup>526</sup> It featured McClellan, "Defending the High Ground: The Legacy of M. E. Bradford," T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr, "Not in Memoriam, but in Affirmation," *Modern Age* vol. 36, no. 3 (1994), and, George W. Carey, "Bradford Meets the Barbarians," *Modern Age* vol. 36, no. 3 (1994), Kendall's student and collaborator.

## Conclusion

### Getting right with Lincoln – or, Jaffa *Agonistes*

By all accounts a political movement that is self-consciously conservative implies, at its heart, the preservation or conservation of *something*. The several debates about Abraham Lincoln that the conservative movement underwent were not period defining moments in the emergence of conservatism in America, but they were indicators of its on-going process of self-definition. Those conservatives that scrutinised Lincoln recognised that his presidency remains the point about which American history pivots. To place themselves and the movement they were forming in relation to Lincoln was a necessary step for self-definition; a clarion statement about how they understood themselves and how they envisioned the state of modern, and historic, America.

In the early stages of conservatism, its major thinkers had a certain anti-majoritarian inclination. They understood themselves as bastions of right-thinking; defenders of the Western tradition under siege. Russell Kirk is the classic example of this conservative discomfort with twentieth century society. Kirk initially disregarded Lincoln in his sweep of Anglophone conservatism, favouring, among others, John C. Calhoun. His aversion gradually gave way to a view that accepted Lincoln as a conservative figure. The influence of Richard Weaver on Kirk's thought is clear as Kirk partially accepted Weaver's arguments about Lincoln as an oasis of moral realism. Later conservatives, Meyer and Bradford in particular, had their own awkward relationships with modernity and mass society. Their rejection of Lincoln is symbolic of their rejection of modern, popular America.

The early conservatives sought to attest that conservatism was indeed a legitimate perspective in American society. Lincoln – perhaps, along with Washington and Jefferson – is the essential figure of American history. He is the most prominent of the historic presidents and a symbol of America's values and greatness. For the conservative mind the question was two-fold. Was there in fact a conservative tradition, and if so, how did Abraham Lincoln figure in it? Kirk understood this dilemma, at least in part, when attempted to write a conservative tradition. He prized stability, hierarchy, and order and, on those terms, he all but omitted Lincoln. Eventually Kirk did elevate Lincoln to the pantheon of conservative figures, by



virtue of the president's moderation and personal qualities. Following Kirk's only partially successful attempt at writing the conservative tradition, two subsequent approaches to writing the conservative tradition emerged. The first claimed that yes, such a tradition did exist and it was in the teachings of the Founders as ratified by the Constitution and articulated in the *Federalist*. This position of Constitutional veneration was adopted by Meyer, Kendall, and – with a Southern traditionalist addition – Bradford. To explain the dominance of liberalism in the contemporary political context, each thinker concluded that the venerable *and conservative* tradition of the Founders must have been, at some point, gravely distorted. For blame they turned to the greatest moment of crisis in American history and the man that presided over it. These thinkers each determined that Lincoln was at least partially responsible for the emergence of liberalism. Reaching similar conclusions for various, if related reasons, they saw Lincoln as the point of divergence in American tradition. Whether by damaging the balance of the Constitution, establishing a rival supreme symbol, or perniciously saturating heretical notions into American life, Lincoln's presidency was the moment at which the experiment in ordered liberty had soured. Their conservatism entailed a return to what they understood as the original tradition, the tradition of the Founders that preceded the Lincolnian error.

The second response was that adopted by Harry Jaffa and, in some ways, although to a far lesser extent, Richard Weaver. As a disciple of Strauss, Jaffa interpreted the Founding as an event inescapably modern in nature. As a regime, the United States was bound up with the failings of modernity. America needed Lincoln, the magnanimous philosopher-statesman, to transfigure the Declaration of Independence into an articulation of an ancient, transcendent truth, and dedicate the nation to its pursuit. In doing so, Lincoln delivered the Union from historicism and the path to nihilism.

Both arguments set upon Lincoln as the turning point in American history. What was in dispute was whether the Lincolnian transformation was salutary or catastrophic. On one level, the debate turns on the relative status of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. It was Lincoln that brought the compromises of the Constitution into line with the promises of the Declaration. Those thinkers critical of Lincoln held that the Constitution, far above the Declaration of Independence, was the basis of the United States and the conservative tradition. They respected the Constitution for the form of government it established and denigrated the Declaration as, at best, naïve. For Meyer, the Constitution had liberty at its heart; for Kendall, consensus. As they understood it, in the political sphere

conservatism and the conservative tradition was nomocratic, concerned ultimately with the processes of government. Lincoln, they argued, assaulted the regime by replacing its nomocratic basis with one of ends. Through Lincoln and the Declaration, the United States made a utopian turn. It became a teleocracy, empowered to achieve its lofty aims. Jaffa, firm in the Straussian belief that a good state is one ordered toward virtue, rejoiced in this transformation. Lincoln endowed the nation with a statement of justice and virtue at its heart. To Jaffa's critics, this constituted a peculiarly moralistic progressivism. Where Meyer, Kendall, Bradford, and Kirk tried to balance liberty and virtue, Jaffa and the Straussian school thought it a failure for the state to remain agnostic on morality. In the shadow of communism abroad and in memory of the horrors of the World War and the Holocaust, the state must stand for justice, lest it abet wrong. By demonstrating that the evil of slavery *cannot* be voted up or down, Lincoln was a powerful symbol for a conservatism built on Straussian insights.

In effect, the rival approaches to interpreting history each proposed a different aspect of the American heritage as the authentic conservative history. Both recognised Lincoln's centrality.

Following the criticism implicit in Willmoore Kendall's *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*, Jaffa produced something of a synthesis between these views. He revised his interpretation of the Founding Fathers, concluding that they were less modern than he originally believed. In Jaffa's new interpretation, Lincoln no longer reinterpreted the Declaration of Independence because he was not required to: the Founders had understood its full truth initially. Therefore, the American tradition as far back as the Founding was good and virtuous. Less a turning point, Lincoln did not redeem the Founding, but restored it after a period of abasement. His "Second Founding" made good on the original Founding's promise. Jaffa claimed the American tradition was conservative because it was justly ordered as early as the Founding; the Revolution was a *conservative revolution* that established natural right. It is unfair, however, to imply that Jaffa or Jaffa's Lincoln – or Jaffa's Founding Fathers – were determined to establish America as a teleocratic regime. He argued consistently through his career that both the Founders and Lincoln were supremely prudential men, scrupulously constitutional in their outlook. Lincoln, Jaffa contended, stood for rightly ordered, prudential and constitutional government. In Jaffa's occasionally heady moral tones, the message of Lincoln's moderation was occasionally lost. It was, however, his hope that Lincoln's example of the founding truths would become what American conservatism was in the business of conserving.

As Jaffa understood it, his project was not outlining his own philosophy for the right, but the re-presentation of Lincoln's arguments to a modern audience. He sought to demonstrate, incontrovertibly, that Lincoln was the great principled statesman of America and that the conservatives were his successors. Jaffa believed himself to be a part of the debate through Western thought, from the Classical era into the twentieth century, between natural right and power. The question had manifested in America in the clash between Lincoln's political philosophy and that of John C. Calhoun. This conflict, Jaffa believed, was very much alive. By defending Lincoln from conservative critics, Jaffa believed he was resisting the Calhounian impulse within modernity and within conservatism. "Calhoun's heirs have dominated the academy and by a shallow and permissive historicism and relativism have subjected 'the laws of nature and of nature's God' to scorn and contempt.... We must then take up the weapons of truth and go forth to battle once again for the cause of Father Abraham, of Union, and of Freedom, as in the olden time".<sup>527</sup> Indeed, critics of Jaffa, including those sympathetic to his causes, have suggested that he too freely associated, or even conflated, his opponents – Kendall, Meyer, Bradford as well as Bork, Scalia, and Rehnquist – with Calhoun.<sup>528</sup>

As a Straussian, Jaffa believed fundamentally that ideas were paramount. For all he shared with his allies in practical terms, his central concern for conservatism was that it be rightly ordered for the right reasons. By this he meant a conservatism that was empowered and governed by the Declaration of Independence. For conservatives to be politically right their policies must be underpinned with true ideas – the low must be seen in light of the high. In Lincoln, the United States has the greatest vision of a true, moral conservatism. "As Harry Jaffa has argued wisely and often", reads the ten year anniversary editorial of the *Claremont Review of Books*, a journal deeply informed by Straussian-Jaffaite conservatism, "a return to the principles of the Constitution and the Gettysburg Address requires something like a revolution not only against modern liberalism but also within modern conservatism".<sup>529</sup> For the remaining Burkean conservatives, however, the Claremont school is anathema. Paul Gottfried, for example, disputes whether Jaffa is conservative at all, suggesting that Buckley

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<sup>527</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 470-1.

<sup>528</sup> Ramesh Ponnuru and Jonah Goldberg, "Sam's Smear: Preposterous History from *the New Republic*," *National Review* vol. LXV, no. 5 (2013), p. 37.

<sup>529</sup> Kesler, "A Decade of CRB," p. 7.

opportunistically brought Jaffa, a right-wing progressive liberal, and his views to the fore in the 1970s to give “new meaning to his drifting movement”.<sup>530</sup>

Critics notwithstanding, the Jaffaite conception of Lincoln, and, to some extent, of conservatism itself, has gained considerable acceptance. This is not to say that Jaffa and his views have been unequivocally embraced – opponents, some of them vociferous, still exist on the fringe. But within the broad movement, Jaffa’s interpretation is the bedrock for twenty-first century conservative readings of Abraham Lincoln and the right’s claims over the president. The Jaffaite Lincoln gained credence as conservatism developed and its historic and political context shifted. Buckley protégé Richard Brookhiser noted that initially “few conservatives agreed with Jaffa. Russell Kirk was nostalgic for Confederates and Tories. Frank Meyer thought well of the American Revolutions, but condemned Lincoln as a statist. Jaffa fought with both of them. One of Jaffa’s few converts was Bill [Buckley] – oddly enough, considering [Buckley’s] early support for segregation, but Bill always liked a good debater”.<sup>531</sup> He added “when I came to read the founders on my own, I saw how right Jaffa was”.<sup>532</sup> Another Buckley protégé, Joe Sobran, admired the mature Jaffa’s interpretation of Lincoln and the Founding during the late 1970s. “[T]his, surely, *is* the American tradition: individualism, freedom, and, yes, equality. That these ideas are constantly misapplied does not affect their truth.... Jaffa’s book brilliantly tears away conceptual distractions, and reveals our own first principles to us”.<sup>533</sup> Steven Hayward recalled a neoconservative luminary, probably Irving Kristol, who admitted that Jaffa was enjoying a vindication: “It was not clear even as late as 1980 which direction the conservative movement would take in the aftermath of Reagan’s election. It could have gone in the direction of Russell Kirk, toward a Burkean, tradition-oriented conservatism, or in a more purely libertarian direction. Instead, the main current of conservatism has come to focus on the American Founding and the centrality of the Declaration of Independence”.<sup>534</sup> In a biography of the political philosopher in *National*

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<sup>530</sup> Gottfried, *Conservatism in America*, p. 20.

<sup>531</sup> Brookhiser, *Right Place, Right Time*, p. 98.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

<sup>533</sup> M. J. Sobran, “Saving the Declaration,” *National Review* vol. 30, no. 52 (1978), p. 1603. Sobran has been often referred to as the finest writer to work for *National Review*. However, after a successful and impressive career, Sobran broke with the mainstream conservative movement on charges of anti-Semitism. He drifted toward the paleoconservative position, including its attack on Lincoln, and into obscurity.

<sup>534</sup> Steven Hayward, “The Vindication of Harry Jaffa,” <http://www.powerlineblog.com/archives/2011/07/the-vindication-of-harry-jaffa.php>. Hayward wrote “I happened into a casual conversation with one of the most prominent of the “neo-conservatives” who, in the course of things, mentioned that he thought Jaffa was rightly enjoying his vindication. I won’t name the person since it was a private conversation, but he was someone Jaffa had frequently attacked”. In all likelihood he means Irving Kristol, although it’s possible, if unlikely that he meant Norman Podhoretz, who is referred to by name earlier in the post, or someone else entirely.

*Review*, John J. Miller suggested that “Jaffa may be the most important conservative political theorist of his generation”, a generation that, it should be noted, included Frank Meyer, Willmoore Kendall, and a platoon of other seminal conservatives.<sup>535</sup> Hyperbole aside, Jaffa was important in shaping conservatism and integral in guiding the way it interpreted Lincoln.

Although the perception of Lincoln within the major conservative publications is a generally positive one, there remain critical voices on the fringes of the movement. The remnants of the anti-Lincoln challenges made by Meyer, Kendall and Bradford have small but serious followings. The anti-Lincoln right occupies extremities of both the libertarian and traditionalist sub-branches of conservatism with a solid cross-over in their arguments and sources. On the traditionalist anti-Lincoln fringe, the Bradford influence is pervasive; he is the authoritative voice. Paleoconservative magazines like *The American Conservative* and the Rockford Institute’s *Chronicles*, following Bradford, maintain a critical line. The libertarian anti-Lincoln tradition incorporates Frank Meyer’s critique of Lincoln as a centralizer that fought the legitimate act of secession and Bradford’s litany of charges. The anti-Lincoln impulses and the interplay between them are best exemplified by Thomas DiLorenzo. A prolific and shrill critic of Lincoln, DiLorenzo is both a senior fellow in the libertarian Ludwig Von Mises Institute and an associated scholar of the Southern, borderline neoconfederate Abbeville Institute.<sup>536</sup> By regurgitating and expanding Bradford and Meyer’s criticisms, DiLorenzo has attracted a cult following but, unlike his forebears, he has far less legitimacy within the conservative movement.<sup>537</sup>

As staunch as conservative and libertarian critics of Lincoln are, their intellectual leaders are marginal at best. The paleoconservative magazines have low circulation: *The American Conservative* has 8,000 subscribers; *Chronicles* approximately 6,000; *Southern Partisan* is available only online. The paleoconservative moment reached its high watermark in 1992 and never regained its influence, although the anti-Lincoln libertarian fringe maintains a cult following. By contrast, the essentially pro-Lincoln conservative magazines *National Review*

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<sup>535</sup> Miller, “The House of Jaffa: The Remarkable Career of a Scholar Still at Work,” p. 32.

<sup>536</sup> DiLorenzo, an economist at Loyola University, Maryland, has become the largest anti-Lincoln figure. His works have been called screeds and have been severely criticised by others on the right. Thomas DiLorenzo, *Lincoln Unmasked: What You're Not Supposed to Know About Dishonest Abe*, Reprint ed. (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2007), *passim*. Jaffa has debated DiLorenzo.

<sup>537</sup> *National Review* published a review of DiLorenzo’s book by Ken Masugi, a student of Jaffa. It began “To get an idea of how truly awful this book is...”. Unlike Kendall, Meyer, and Bradford, outside of the neoconfederate right no conservative intellectuals take DiLorenzo seriously. Nevertheless, he retains a sizeable popular readership.

and *The Weekly Standard* have circulations of 166,000, and 105,000 respectively.<sup>538</sup> Indeed, conservative academic Barry Shain, a thinker in the Kendall-Bradford tradition, while suggesting interpretations of Lincoln as a tool for distinguishing true conservatives from neoconservatives and classical liberals, admitted that he was one of only two “conservatives” recently surveyed to deem Lincoln a failure.<sup>539</sup>

The first generation of conservative intellectuals were far more likely to entertain anti-Lincoln views than their successors. Why, then, did the Jaffaite Lincoln, or at least a version heavily influenced by Jaffa, come to dominate over and against the various permutations of the anti-Lincoln tradition? Much of the explanation lies in the changes within conservatism and the shifting historical and electoral realities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Foremost, Meyer and Kendall were both critical of Lincoln at the height of the civil rights movement. Conservatives in the fifties and sixties embraced Southern society and culture as a bulwark against liberalism. They were, by and large, wary of the constitutional issues at stake in the civil rights movement. With the general end to that tumultuous era and desegregation a *fait accompli*, Lincoln was no longer an historic example of modern radical transformation. Once the justness of the civil rights cause was widely acknowledged on the right, Lincoln could even be deployed as a conservative leader on abolition and civil rights. In a similar vein, the end of the Cold War and threat of domestic communism led to a fundamental shift in conservative thinking on equality. Without the threat of totalitarianism, a new willingness to entertain shades of meaning in equality emerged where previously the conservative approach had bordered on apocalyptic. As opportunity and aspiration became the hallmark of Republican politics, instead of a by-word for egalitarianism, Lincoln could be appreciated as a prophet of equality of opportunity – not outcome. Equality could, as Jaffa had argued, be a conservative principle. Finally, through Reagan conservatism was itself successful as a mainstream political persuasion. Self-described conservatives are no longer an isolated remnant rebelling against the liberal establishment. They are an establishment in and of themselves. A hundred and fifty years after his death, no broad-based American movement can seriously reject Lincoln. Instead of rejecting the trappings of the “liberal establishment”, the conservative intellectuals have sought to appropriate some of the choice symbols of America, including Lincoln.

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<sup>538</sup> There is also the issue of frequency, where *The American Conservative* is bi-monthly; *National Review* is bi-weekly.

<sup>539</sup> Barry Alan Shain, “The Americanization of Conservatism,” *Modern Age* vol 42, no. 1 (2000), p. 124.

To establish whether Abraham Lincoln was conservative is, in a sense, Sisyphean. As the nation changed, so did, inevitably, the conservative movement. Over the twentieth century there was a gradual but distinct shift in the movement's primary emphases. As conservatives embraced new orientations they found themselves closer to Lincoln. Where the president was difficult to hold up on the basis of Kirkian prescriptive right he is, as Weaver and Jaffa held, a leading symbol of *natural right*. Lincoln is not easily lionised as a champion of hierarchy and order, but as a symbol of freedom and opportunity he is ideal. Where there are questions about him as a standard for civil liberties, Lincoln is the great symbol of a celebration of liberty that remembers the freedom of slaves. As conservatives came to conceive of themselves as a leading and modern political movement instead of a civilizational rear-guard action, they embraced Lincoln as an energetic and conservative president of the modern era.

For over fifty years Harry Jaffa has been the determined proponent and defender of Lincoln within conservatism. Both in his explicitly Lincolnian work and his wider thought, Jaffa has maintained that true American conservatism must look constantly to Lincoln for direction and inspiration. When conservative luminaries like Meyer, Kendall, and Kirk questioned whether Lincoln ought to hold the respect of conservatives or whether the principles of the Declaration of Independence could be the basis of a meaningful tradition, Jaffa rose to defend the first Republican president. Jaffa's success was in part due to the strength of his arguments. They were thoroughly grounded in the American tradition and rigorously reasoned. As a debater, he was unafraid to make his point sharply; many friends and allies felt the sharp end of his zealous pen. The impressive array of Jaffa's opponents also speaks to his sheer longevity. He debated every major conservative or libertarian critic of Lincoln over the past five decades and outlived most. When Lincoln was challenged on the right in the early decades of conservatism, Jaffa made the case for Lincoln's conservative nature. Gradually, others became converted to the Jaffaite view, William F. Buckley perhaps most importantly. In the later decades of the conservative era, through his own work and that of his students, Jaffa has been integral in not only defending Lincoln within conservatism, but shaping the Lincoln image on the right.

We might say, in closing, that the general acceptance of Lincoln by the conservative right is down to the essential place of Abraham Lincoln in America. The question remains how can a movement be authentically American if it stands against him? With some exceptions, the American conservative movement now seeks to appropriate the sixteenth – and first

Republican – president as its own. The right, finally, has gotten right with Lincoln. It has done so on remarkably Jaffaite terms.



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## Acknowledgements

This thesis is the culmination of my time spent at the University of Canterbury and there are a great many to whom I owe a great deal for its completion. The first and most significant note of thanks and appreciation must go to my supervisor, Peter S. Field who suggested a study of the conservatives' historical interpretations of Lincoln – an intersection of our interests, perhaps. I owe him much for his patience, knowledge, insight, and willingness to both challenge me and to read my early and disordered drafts. Although the final result of this project may have taken a shape dissimilar to what Peter may have envisioned, I hope it goes with his blessing. A great deal of thanks must also go to my secondary advisor, Michael Grimshaw. His advice has been instrumental in drawing out some of my key arguments and themes and I appreciate his enthusiasm for my project. Also at Canterbury I would like to thank my graduate colleagues, Judy Robertson, and the History Department. Thanks especially to Ivan Ignatov and Gregory Hynes for the ridiculous conversation and hijinks. Beyond Christchurch I would like to offer a note of appreciation to Ted V. McAllister of Pepperdine University, Paul V. Murphy of Grand Valley State University, and Russell Jenkins of *National Review* for providing advice and sources. Special thanks to Alvin S. Felzenberg – whose interest in my research, knowledge, and advice was both invaluable and gratifying – and to Harry V. Jaffa – whose personal friendliness and incredible recollection are justifiably praised.

I would like to offer profound and humble thanks to my Mother and Father, who gifted me with a love of learning and a love of History and to whom I owe an incalculable amount. Finally, my deepest love and appreciation goes to Jamee Elder, who listened to me speak endlessly about old white men, read and proofed drafts, learned more about Lincoln than she ever cared to know, and responded with affection. *Thank you.*